



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Facts About Wildland Fire Management

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manages nearly 100 million acres of public land in the United States and its territories. These lands comprise 19% of all Department of the Interior lands, and 14% of the federal lands that fall under the jurisdiction of a land management agency:

- The Service's lands include 545 national wildlife refuges and 69 national fish hatcheries.
- There is at least one refuge within an hour's drive of every major U.S. city.
- 39 million refuge visitors last year generated more than \$860 million that benefited local economies.
- The Service has 75 million burnable acres, including 24 million acres of forest and brushland and four million grassland acres.



Crews in Alaska monitor a fire-use situation in wilderness at Tetlin NWR. (USFWS)

Fire and fuels management has always been essential to the Service's mission:

- More than 50% of Service lands in the continental U.S. (more than 90% in Alaska) are portions of ecosystems that are fire adapted, meaning that the vegetation is dependent on periodic fire.
- Service employees are experts in prescribed fire use, and since the 1930s, have used fire to accomplish the mission of protecting communities and resources, reducing fuels, and enhancing and maintaining wildlife habitat in fire-adapted ecosystems.

- Fire is a critical land management tool. No other process produces the same ecological benefits.
- Fire is a tool used widely in restoring and maintaining habitat on refuges.
- Prescribed fire is the most cost-effective way to accomplish the dual benefit of fuel reduction and habitat improvement.
- Mechanical treatments to reduce fuels loads may be needed before prescribed fire can be safely and effectively used.
- Once lands have been restored to conditions that allow periodic prescribed fire to maintain them, a regimen of treatments based on natural fire intervals is more cost effective than allowing lands to revert to previous conditions where mechanical treatments are needed and the cycle starts again.



Deer return to forage in a burned area near Grangeville, Idaho. (USFWS)



A prescribed burn is ignited at night at Sheldon-Hart Mountain NWR in Oregon. (USFWS)

The Service excludes and suppresses fire when necessary to protect non-fire adapted resources, reduce spread of invasive plants and accomplish its mission:

- An average of 500 wildfires burn 260,000 Service acres annually.
- More wildfires on Service lands occur in southern and eastern states than in the west, partly because of the relative size of the Service's land base.
- Most of these wildfires are caused by human activity.

The Service protects more than 700 communities and wildland-urban interface (WUI) areas:

- Many refuges are in or near urban areas.
- More than 50% of all new housing in the last decade was constructed in WUI areas.
- In the WUI, the Service is committed to protect community infrastructure – parks, utilities, and watersheds – as well as homes and businesses.

Program Resources and Capabilities:

- The Service's annual fire program budget is approximately \$80 million, broken into eight areas.
- The Service employs nearly 800 fire professionals (530 FTE), and more than 2,000 non-fire employees with red cards who assist with fire and fuels management. This helps reduce costs.

- Prior to 2001, the Service treated more acres annually using fire mechanical or chemical means than all DOI agencies combined.
- The Service fire program consistently reports the lowest per-acre treatment cost in the DOI due to the strong tie between fire and the agency's mission, the expertise of Service employees, low administrative costs relating to NEPA review, and rarity of appeals relating to NEPA because of the collaboration and trust that have been nurtured at a local level.



A prescribed fire like this one in the wildland-urban interface at Mississippi Sandhill Crane NWR takes considerable skill and experience to manage safely. (USFWS)

Challenges:

- The fragmented nature of the Service's land base means its staff is dispersed over broad distances.
- Some Service lands have no suppression resources or firefighters on site.
- The Service's fire managers and supervisors are involved in a broader array of duties than their counterparts in other agencies. Also, the number and size of urban refuges is increasing.
- The number of urban refuges is increasing yearly, and development adjacent to refuges creates a pressing need for more prescribed fire and other fuels treatments in order to protect communities.
- Current funding allows for only about half the annual treatments needed Service-wide. A hazardous fuels treatment backlog of 300,000 to 400,000 acres is carried forward year after year and a significant portion of this backlog is in the WUI, or will soon be.

To find out more about the effectiveness of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service fire program, visit www.fws.gov/fire

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