



National Fire Plan

Cooperative Prescribed Fire Protects Communities; Provides Firefighter Training

Firefighters from several agencies came together in 2005 to burn approximately 300 acres at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge Wetland Preserve Easement. The project created fuel breaks in the wildland-urban interface between Interstate 5, refuge lands, and several communities in the Elk Grove area just south of Sacramento, California.

The project, funded through the National Fire Plan, was collaboratively developed and offered a training exercise for local fire departments and federal firefighters. Objectives included hazardous fuels reduction, smoke mitigation, and measures to protect threatened and endangered species such as fairy shrimp, which remain dormant until rains activate small, seasonal wetlands known as vernal pools.

The Stone Lakes NWR is surrounded by urban development and is at a high risk from fire ignitions along roads, the railroad, and structures. Steve Foster, deputy district fire chief of Elk Grove Community Services District, said firefighters responded to 98 grass fires along the 25-mile stretch of Interstate 5 in 2003. Those fires threatened homes, risked public and firefighter safety and caused smoke problems for freeway travelers and local residents.

The easement property is managed for a mix of natural and man-made vernal pools within a grassland community. Due to the large number of non-native annual grasses that grow in this area, management has emphasized grazing as the best method to reduce non-native plants and enhance vernal pool conditions. However, to protect adjacent communities from wildfire, grazing alone is not enough. Fuel breaks also are necessary, but must incorporate minimum impact strategies and tactics to protect vernal pool species. No soil disturbance, such as disking or dozers, can occur without special management direction. This leaves prescribed burning as one of the best methods for meeting these objectives.

Prescribed burning and grazing have been regular management tools at this wetland preserve. Since the project began the number of wildfires occurring in the area has diminished greatly. Even though long-term maintenance of this area needs to be addressed, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Elk Grove CSD Fire Department, the City of Elk Grove, local homeowner's associations and other cooperators plan to continue working together on this and other wildland-urban interface projects to protect the community and the refuge from wildfire.

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