

October 2020



Prescribed Fire

Managing Risk & Restoring California's Landscape



California is facing increased wildfire risk and fire seasons that are nearly year-round. Forestry, fire and air quality experts are working together to counteract wildfire's damage to public health and the environment by increasing the pace and scale of prescribed fire use across the state.

What is Prescribed Fire?

Prescribed fire (or prescribed burning) is the planned and controlled application of fire to the land, under specified, low-risk weather conditions.

Prescribed fire has a long history in California. Native American tribes have used it on their lands for centuries. Prescribed fire is one of the most important tools land and forest managers use today to reduce wildfire hazards, clear excess vegetation, control plant diseases, improve wildlife habitats and restore natural ecosystems.



Protecting Californians from Wildfires

Due to climate change, drought and other factors, about 25 percent of California's population – more than 11 million people – currently live in high-fire risk areas. One important reason the state uses prescribed fire is to protect these communities, particularly those in the area between urban communities and wildlands known as the wildland-urban interface. By burning excessive vegetation, prescribed fire creates a natural fuel break that slows the spread of potential wildfires, thus reducing potential damage and giving fire crews a greater chance to put out the flames before they reach nearby communities.



Planning a Prescribed Burn

Each prescribed fire is carefully planned with safety and public health in mind. For each burn, the land owner or manager, fire officials, and local air district staff must work together to develop a detailed plan.

Planning begins months – even years – ahead of time. As the planned burn day approaches, officials monitor weather patterns and make public notifications. The local air district provides final approval to burn 24–48 hours beforehand, which can be delayed or canceled at any point if conditions change.



Smoke: Short-term Impacts, Long-term Benefits

While prescribed fire has many important benefits, it may cause short-term impacts including smoke and local traffic delays.

Fire managers work closely with local air districts when conducting a prescribed fire to minimize the effects of smoke on the public.



Smoke from prescribed fire is typically less intense, slower moving, and more localized than smoke from wildfires. And because prescribed fires are carefully planned, they provide an opportunity to prepare for impacts – unlike intense and fast-moving wildfires.

Prescribed fires may also cause temporary road closures or traffic delays. This can be due to smoke on the road that reduces visibility or to the necessary placement of fire equipment on the road. In these cases, please be patient. Remember, prescribed fire impacts are temporary, but the benefits last for years.

Protect Yourself from Smoke

Smoke can pose a public health risk, particularly for sensitive groups like children, older adults, and those with heart, lung or respiratory diseases. Healthy individuals are not at significant risk from short-term exposure to smoke typical of prescribed fire. Talk with your doctor to find out what is best for you and your family. The following are some basic steps you can take to protect your health when there is smoke in the air.



Check
air quality
reports



Stay indoors,
close windows
& doors



Run your AC with
a clean air filter



Avoid outdoor
activities

Planning for All Situations

Weather conditions can change suddenly, and fire does not always behave as expected. It is possible – though uncommon – for a prescribed fire to go out of prescription. In these cases, the burn manager implements pre-planned and approved mitigation measures. Depending on circumstances, these could include fire suppression, a decision to stop lighting new areas and let others burn out, or reclassifying the prescribed fire as a wildfire. Reclassifying the fire activates immediate, additional support to ensure the safety of the public and nearby natural resources.

For more information on how California is addressing forest health, visit fmtf.fire.ca.gov.

Or call the Imperial County Air Pollution Control District at (442) 265-1800 or visit <http://apcd.imperialcounty.org/>.