

Fire

NPS.gov / Park Home / Wildland Fire / Types of Wildland Fire

Types of Wildland Fire



Aircraft, including helicopters and single engine airtankers (SEATs) may be used to cool a wildfire's edge allowing firefighters on the ground to work. However, other means than aircraft are necessary to fully suppress a wildfire when necessary. NPS Photo

Wildland fire is a general term describing any non-structure fire that occurs in vegetation such as trees, grasses, and shrubs. Structure fires are composed of human-made objects like buildings or cars. There are essentially two main categories of wildland fire – wildfire and prescribed fire. A wildfire cannot be a prescribed fire.

Additional fire terms can be found in the [National Wildfire Coordinating Group Glossary](#)

Wildfire

Wildfires can be started by many different causes. This includes lightning, lava, and even people. Most wildfires in the United States are caused by humans.

Every fire, every time, gets a thorough review once the fire is discovered. Multiple factors determine the response fire managers take on a wildfire once it is discovered.

There is a desire to categorize a fire as "suppression" or "non-suppression" but frequently it's somewhere in the middle and managers take a variety of actions on a wildfire based on what's outlined in a fire management plan.



The Meadow Fire burns in Yosemite National Park. Half Dome is in the foreground. NPS Photo

How Are We Responding?

Some wildfires are either threatening life and property or have the potential to threaten life and property. In these cases, the wildfire is suppressed – meaning firefighters are actively working to contain and then control the fire – through a range of techniques removing one of the elements of the fire triangle such as removing fuels, using dirt to suffocate the fire, and / or cooling vegetation with targeted water.



A fire crew works to build fireline during a fire. NPS Photo

There is no single answer. Safety, threats to life and property, and the benefit to the ecosystem are all taken into consideration. The right decision in wildland fire management considers the right response, at the right time, for the right reasons.

No Single Answer

Naturally-caused wildfire has been part of ecosystems for millennia, and as such, these ecosystems have adapted to it. In some cases portions of wildfires may be monitored, while other portions may be suppressed or actively extinguished.

Where a fire is located, timing, conditions, and safety are just some of the factors in considering how a fire is managed. Active and appropriate wildland fire management is on a spectrum from full suppression to full monitoring.

Learn more about wildfire



A fire in wilderness is monitored via NPS helicopter. NPS Photo / C. Vernon

Prescribed Fire

A prescribed fire is ignited by fire managers after careful planning, under a set of conditions that must be met prior to ignition, and is carefully monitored. Prescribed fires are carried out for very specific purposes or objectives and may be used to manage certain types of natural and **cultural landscapes**.



Prescribed fire is used all across the National Park System. Management of prescribed fire requires a lot of pre-planning in order to use it safely and successfully. Photo by Nate Williamson

Objectives for prescribed fires can include reducing buildup of dead and downed trees around communities or other developed areas such as campgrounds, promoting growth of native plant species, improving habitat for animals, and removing harmful exotic, or nonnative plant species.

Each prescribed fire has a written out plan, known as a prescription that indicates the acceptable fuel and weather conditions under which a fire should be set so that it can be managed safely and meet the objectives of the prescribed fire plan. The fire's prescription is outlined in a fire's burn plan, which is carried out by a team, led by a burn boss.

View a real-life example of the Objectives from the Incident Action Plan for the Goliath Prescribed Burn in Kings Canyon National Park.

Learn more about prescribed fire

Was this page helpful?

Yes

No

 An official form of the United States government. Provided by **Touchpoints**