

**FIRE HAS A ROLE:
AN EDUCATIONAL CAMPAIGN DEVELOPED BY THE PRESCOTT NATIONAL
FOREST TO EMPHASIZE THE ROLE FIRE HAS IN RESTORATION AND
MANAGEMENT OF FOREST HEALTH**

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INTRODUCTION

The Prescott National Forest's Fire Has a Role program started as an educational platform for the Fire Management and Prevention programs to fill an informational need within the urban interface area of the Prescott Basin. When the public, stakeholders, and media heard the words "prescribed fire", questions and concerns started to roll in about unwanted smoke in the valley. However, land management is about so much more than just "putting unwanted smoke in the air." As a team, Fire Management Specialists started discussing the disconnect, and often times misunderstanding, between our audiences and the tools that we use for land management, including fire, timber thinning, mastication, and natural ignitions used for multiple resource benefit. Hence, Fire Has a Role was born.

Fire Has a Role is designed to be an educational tool. The intent of this program is to help the public and our stakeholders understand fire's historic role in our ecosystems, as well as to demonstrate the benefits of fire on the landscape to the many positive ecosystem impacts that are important to all of us. Working with specialists in multiple disciplines, we aim to inform our audiences about topics such as forest vegetation health, watershed sustainability, wildlife habitat, and wildland firefighter and public safety.

Ultimately, this new and innovative program will change the dynamics of traditional fire prevention messaging from continually telling our audience that "fire is bad", to "fire is a natural and needed process in our ecosystem, when implemented and managed at the right time, in the right place, and under the right conditions".

METHODOLGY

Fire Has a Role has been designed to start a paradigm shift in internal and external thinking about fire's role in the ecosystem. After decades of fire suppression, forest have been taken out of their natural fire regime. This proves to be problematic on multiple levels. Due to lack of fire our forests are becoming unhealthy, overgrown and competing for the sun, nutrients and water trees need to survive. In turn, ladder fuels are created and forests are more susceptible to disease. On the other hand, the safety of the public and our firefighting community can be compromised due to the uncharacteristic fire behavior these forest generate.

The general population thinks that fire is fire no matter the cause or intent behind it. Prescribed fire is planned and intentionally set, by trained firefighters, in order to meet specific objectives to benefit the natural resource and protect values at risk. Wildfire, caused naturally or through humans, are unplanned fire events. Both types of fire can and do have a role benefiting our natural resources. Science proves that fire is a natural component to our ecosystems and occurs at different intervals and intensities. Ponderosa Pine-Evergreen Oak forests need a low intensity fire on average every 6-12 years to keep proper spacing among trees and brush, and raise crown base heights. On the other hand, Chaparral forests need a high intensity, crown fire on average every 35-100 years. These particular species are considered obligated seeders, meaning that they require some kind of fire to germinate new growth.

Regardless if a fire is planned or unplanned; the conditions need to be right for that fire to have a beneficial effect on the environment. Even in many cases where firefighters are fully suppressing a wildland fire, there can still be some value to the environment, not to be mistaken from the fact that fire managers will still prevent those fires that threaten lives and property to the absolute best of their ability.

Fire in the ecosystem has a very important role in benefiting wildlife through the different changes in their habitat. Most wildlife depend on the growth of new vegetation as an important food source. Fire puts nutrients back into the soil and spurs on new vegetation growth. In addition, fire generates open spaces that's utilization varies with different species.

The general knowledge of the public is that fire has a negative effect on watersheds, when in fact it is the opposite. Regular fire regimes promote strong tree densities, grasses and forbs, which in turn protects soil and reduces risk of erosion. When watersheds are in this healthy condition they are at less of a risk to experience a high intensity fire. Water quality is in direct correlation with healthy watersheds.

It is commonly said "fight fire with fire", which refers to implementation of planned ignition fires, and appropriately managed unplanned ignition fires in where fuel loading is reduced and makes those unwanted fires much easier for firefighters to suppress and keep small. Vegetation would burn in a mosaic pattern, thus ignition sources are limited. With a forest outside its normal fire regime vegetation has accumulated over time, generating unhealthy and hazardous fuel loading conditions.

Management strategies need to work together. Through mechanical thinning and logging hazardous fuels can be removed or rearranged. Afterwards, through the implementation of a planned prescribed fire nutrients are returned to the soil, new vegetation grows for wildlife benefit, and watersheds return to a fire resilient state.

CONCLUSION

The Fire Has a Role program mission is to educate the public, cooperators and stakeholders on the importance of fire within the ecosystem; including hazardous fuels treatments, prescribed fire, the use of wildfire to meet multiple resource objectives and its direct correlation to wildlife habitat, watershed sustainability, firefighter and public safety, and the wildland urban interface.

This is directly related to the mission of the US Forest Service; to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations.

Overall, the Fire Has a Role program has been established to raise awareness of the ecological and historic role of wildfire in fire-adapted ecosystems amongst internal and external partners. This is being accomplished through the development and implementation of a dynamic multi-phase campaign to create a shared understanding amongst multiple audiences about fire regimes, fire ecology, and the benefits of restorative treatments. This will be achieved through improved localized fire prevention messaging and a dynamic toolbox developed for fire managers, line officers, and support staff. The Fire Has a Role toolbox will promote understanding about fire's role on the landscape through the use of videos, printed materials, social media, innovative education programs developed for age appropriate audiences, and presentations for various groups and communities.

REFERENCES

- *Report*
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