



International Fuel Break

The International Fuel Break, located at the border between Mexico and the United States in San Diego County, is one of the most unique Wildland/Urban Interface projects in California. The fuel break had its origins in the 1930s when a narrow area adjacent to 40 miles of the border was cleared of chaparral brush in an effort to stop wildfires from spreading from one country into the other. Over time, maintenance of the fuel break diminished and soon the chaparral reclaimed the site of the former fuel break.



Fence line marks border between Mexico and the United States. To the left of road, one section of the International fuel break spreads to the horizon.



Rugged section of fuel break.

Fast forward to the late 1990s when "Operation Gatekeeper" tightened border access in the Tijuana, Mexico area. At the same time, the rugged mountainous area of eastern San Diego County experienced a dramatic increase in fire activity. It was determined that illegal immigrants, now using this rural and remote route into the US, were responsible for the increased fire occurrences. The origins of most of these wildfires were immigrant campfires intended for warmth or food preparation that were improperly extinguished and fanned by the hot, dry, and windy conditions the region is known for. The damage these fires were causing was significant - injuries and fatalities, threats to local communities and property, damage to the ecosystem, and high suppression costs. This unprecedented situation required coordinated and comprehensive action.

The reestablishment of the International Fuel Break is one of many projects currently underway to reduce the frequency and intensity of wildfires in the area. BLM's Palm Springs Field Office began the current phase of the fuel break in January 2002 with the assistance of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, the California Department of Corrections, and the McCain Valley Conservation Camp. A two mile area about 300 feet wide is being cleared of most woody fuels with grassy fuels, specimen plants, and vegetative islands for wildlife and aesthetics being maintained. Over a period of years, the fuel break is expected to extend along approximately 30 miles of the border which will not only break up the contiguous chaparral fuels to slow or stall a wildfire, but also provide firefighters with safety zones, burnout options, and increased efficiency of aircraft in suppression activities.

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