



Cooperative Prescribed Fire Protects Communities and Provides Firefighter Training



Firefighters from several agencies came together in 2005 to burn approximately 300 acres of the Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) 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 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 vernal pool species.

The Stone Lakes NWR is surrounded by urban development and is at a high risk from fire ignitions along roads, the railroad, and structures. According to Elk Grove Community Services District (CSD) Deputy Fire Chief, Steve Foster, Elk Grove CSD firefighters responded to 98 different 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 Interstate traffic 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 high number of nonnative annual grasses, management has emphasized grazing as the best method to reduce nonnative 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 on the wetland preserve. Since project implementation, wildfire occurrence has been greatly reduced. Long-term maintenance is a concern, but collaborative planning efforts between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Elk Grove CSD Fire Department, the City of Elk Grove, local homeowner's associations and other cooperators will continue to expand these and other wildland urban interface efforts for the protection of community and refuge values.

This project was funded through the National Fire Plan (<http://www.fireplan.gov/>). The National Fire Plan was developed in August 2000, following a landmark wildland fire season, with the intent of actively responding to severe wildland fires and their impacts to communities while ensuring sufficient firefighting capacity for the future.

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