



2014 Fire Season - Successes in Acres Burned, a PIO Perspective

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In 2014, managers found many opportunities to manage wildfire for multiple resource benefits and restoration. The Kaibab, Coconino, Coronado and Santa Fe National Forests, as well as the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the San Carlos Apache Tribe, and the National Park Service all actively utilized this management strategy during the 2014 fire season. These decisions are not to be taken lightly as there are a myriad of factors involved. Following is an example that occurred on the Kaibab National Forest.

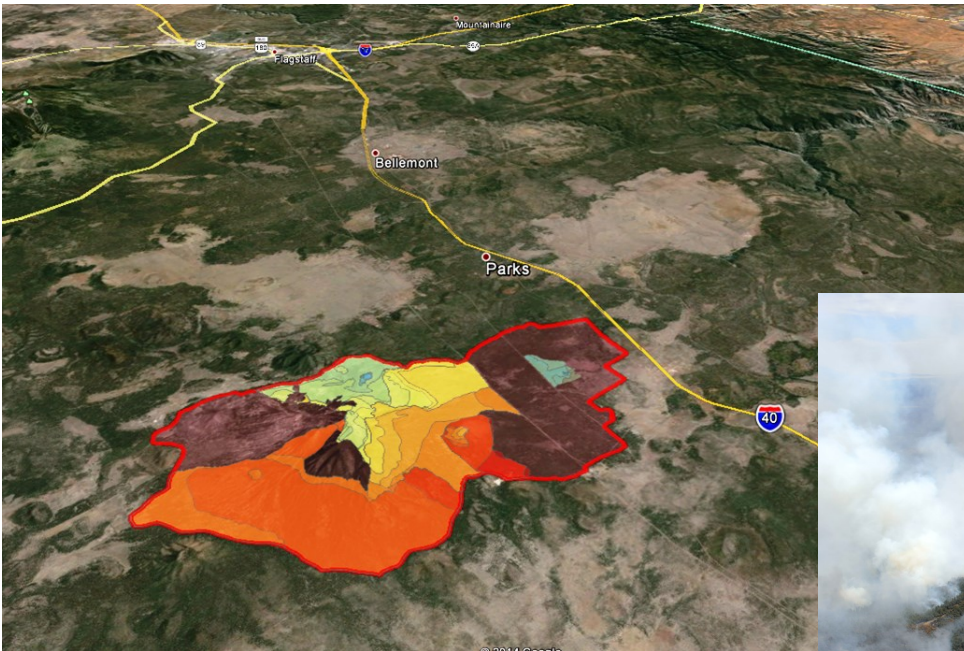


Image (left) is a progression map of the Sitgreaves Complex from August 15, 2014. Direction is approximately southeast at the top of the image; below is Sitgreaves Complex July 20, 2014; courtesy of U.S. Forest Service.



Making the Tough, but Right, Decision

In the early weeks of July 2014, two lightning strike fires were reported on Sitgreaves Mountain near Parks, Arizona. With one fire spreading swiftly high up on the eastern flank of the mountain, fire managers had two choices: suppression or restoration. Opting to consider restoration, fire managers started rapid consultation with specialists in silviculture, archaeology, recreation, wildlife, and more. Within 48 hours, a consensus was reached and with the support of the forest plan and forest leadership, the ‘tough’ decision was made. “It would have been easy to put it out at an acre,” said Incident Commander, Vic Morfin. “Instead we drew a 20,000 acre box around a 9,000 foot road-less mountain just outside the wildland urban interface (WUI) and pushed ‘go.’” That ‘go’ meant a 2 month, Type 3 incident, aerial ignition, and smoke management commitment to what became the Sitgreaves Complex. Fire managers across the southwest were making similar management decisions in coordination with each other and regional leadership.

Saving Our Mountain

As heavy aerial ignition operations began on the Sitgreaves Complex, local residents and casual travelers alike driving by on I-40 looked up to see a mountain on fire. Steady orange glows at night and large columns



of smoke in the day prompted roadside pictures, panicked residents, and more than a few frightened phone calls. With hundreds of homes and thousands of residents, public information was at the forefront as each new plastic sphere dispenser, or PSD was dropped. Questions such as “what do you mean you aren’t going to put it out?” or “Lady, you and the Forest Service can’t do a thing right in the woods...” were very typical. In designing a public information campaign for heart and minds the message had to be simple, honest, and tangible. And so, the message “fire to save our mountain” was born. Conversations started with how this fire would help keep the mountain there for our kids and grandkids and in turn, opened the door for teachable moments about landscape restoration and historic fire regimes. Public Information Officers went door to door at more than 300 homes, live tweeted a PSD operation, and invested the time to play checkers with the seniors outside the small country store. Concerned phone calls dropped off to one or two a day even as smoke columns continued to rise each day and sink into homes each night on and off for over a month.



Sitgreaves Complex burning on July 21, 2014. Image courtesy of U.S. Forest Service.

The Desired Condition Expanded

While no one stops on I-40 today to note the beautifully emerging mosaic pattern or the 98 years of hazardous fuel buildup removed, a local resident called to say “I didn’t understand and I didn’t trust you [USFS]... but I do now.” And so, as much as the ‘tough’ management decision helped restore the landscape, it also helped move the local community and media closer to a desired condition as well. A condition where support is maximized, understanding is high, and confusion is low. A condition where teachable moments abound regardless of why smoke is in the air or what the management strategy is. A condition where forest plans and regional strategies are supported in their respective implementation. A condition where once the last fire was called ‘out’, fire managers had positively moved both the landscape and the community towards the desired condition.

So while the 2015 fire year remains an unknown, the southwest region can build on the 2014 successes in fire management. There are fire leaders who are pioneering new forest plans, new decision support tools, and new strategies to increase landscape resiliency to unplanned ignitions. Of equal importance, many forests and agencies are fostering a public and media culture of self-sufficiency and understanding of fire information, smoke management, and support of those ‘tough’ fire management decisions.