



NEWS Sequoia National Forest
Giant Sequoia National Monument



Lion Fire Public Meeting
Tuesday, July 26, 2011
Kernville Odd Fellows Hall

Rick Larson, Kern River District Ranger - Introductions, review of agenda

Thanks for taking the time to come out and learn about the fire which is currently burning.

There are big impacts occurring on the Sequoia National Forest that have a direct effect on the Kern Valley community and to you. This is a community that wants to be informed. As you know, there have been several fires here over the years.

Agenda:

Paul Gibbs, Incident Commander a *Description of the Lion Fire Operation*;
Deb Schweizer, *Fire ecology and the role of fire in the Sierra Nevada*;
Dave Jones, Kern Air Pollution Board, *an Air Quality Status Report*;
Amy Goriesky, Kern County Public Health, *Ways to stay healthy with the smoke*; and
Priscilla Summers, District Ranger, *Forest Service fire philosophy*

Paul Gibbs, Incident Commander - Description of fire operation and containment strategy

Previous fires helped us in response to this fire, the 2003 Cooney and the 2006 Maggie and Tamarack Fires, the 2009 Shotgun Fire.

We had a very wet winter which has provided multiple opportunities to manage the fire.

The Lion Fire was started by lightning discovered on July 8, at 1:30 p.m., on private property one half mile to the west of Lion Meadows and east of the Little Kern River. This fire's perimeter is limited by previous Golden Trout wilderness fires (Maggie, Tamara, Shotgun etc.) and.

Firefighters are actively working to protect private property and cabins near the fire, including creating better defensible space around cabins, placing hose and firelines near these structures, and completing small burnout operations to develop a perimeter around these areas.

Response to this fire is based on many factors, including risks to public and firefighter safety; type and condition of fuels; weather; land management plan direction; values to protect; and available firefighting assets. Keep in mind, strategies can change as conditions change.

Steep and inaccessible terrain limits the options available to firefighters in response to this wildfire. We are also managing the fire to minimize impacts on spotted owls, the Little Kern Golden Trout and mountain yellow-legged frog.

In some areas of the fire, the best method is to *fight fire with fire*, rather than place firefighters in hazardous situations. Strategic firing operations can limit fire severity (by allowing a backing fire) and can also minimize smoke impacts because of less fuel (vegetation) consumption.

For the next several weeks communities in and adjacent to the Kern River Valley are expected to have smoke from the Lion Fire at, or near ground level, in the morning hours.

The Sequoia National Forest works closely with the Air Pollution Control Districts to balance the fire management program and health and visibility issues. We are trying to use optimal weather conditions (good dispersal windows), optimal ignition techniques, estimates of project emissions, and monitoring equipment when making decisions. We also coordinate daily with neighboring land management agencies and multiple air districts.

The forest service has multiple air quality monitors in Kernville, Springville, Johnsondale, Kennedy Meadows, Camp Nelson, and Independence. The California Air districts also maintain monitoring equipment which adds to all of our perspectives and decision models. These networks of monitors help fire managers understand the impacts of wildfire and its smoke.

Q – What actions are you taking to protect the wildlife?

A. The Little Kern Golden Trout is a native species which we are protecting. We are consulting closely with California Fish and Wildlife Service. One of our objectives is to avoid dropping fire retardant in the nearby streams. Also there are certain areas and streams in the Golden Trout Wilderness that we cannot take water from which could contaminate other streams and fisheries.

We are also taking precautions with the mountain yellow-legged frog and 3-4 spotted owls protected areas of concerns. We're making sure the fire does not run uphill, from the bottom up. We are lighting small fires for fire fighter safety and to slow the fire effects to reduce the amount of smoke. This backing fire technique of burning downhill does not create as much smoke. I am on the phone daily with the San Joaquin Air Quality Control District (SJQACD) and multiple agencies discussing the fire effects and smoke management.

Deb Schweizer, Fire Information Officer - *Fire ecology and the role of fire in the Sierra Nevada*

The Sierra Nevada is one of the most fire-prone and fire adapted ecosystems in the nation. This is an area where natural systems have evolved with fire. Under the right conditions we can manage some fire to restore resilience to ecosystems, improve wildlife habitat, and prevent heavy accumulations of flammable fuels, while we actively protect lives, property, and resources.

There is no recorded fire history recorded here in over 90 years. Historically, fire would have occurred about every 15-20 years in this forest type. By taking advantage of fire in this wet year, we are preventing a large McNally-like fire that will produce much greater smoke in the future.

This year because of the high snowpack and cool spring, the fire intensity has been moderate and we are seeing good fire behavior. The Golden Trout Wilderness area has significant fuel accumulation problems.

The National Park Service have been using fire, both lightning, and prescribed, for over 40 years. We have learned a lot along the way. The effects of fire exclusion cannot be undone overnight. However, we have restored fire into some of our watersheds and have begun to see “self-limiting fires,” fires that are easier to respond to, smaller, and less smoky, and four generations of young sequoias that are the product of our pro-active fire management program.

Historically, the parks saw about 15 – 20,000 acres burn annually. We have an aggressive program and we average approximately 5,000 acres a year. There has never been more fuel on the ground in recorded history.

Dave Jones, Kern Air Pollution Board - *Air Quality status report*

How to avoid smoke impacts.

We recommend that if you see or smell smoke on the ground stay out of it. If you can smell it or see it on the ground you don't want to exercise in it. The best thing to do is use air conditioning. If you don't have an air conditioner go visit a neighbor who does.

The Eastern Kern Air Pollution Control District is recommending that individuals reduce or suspend their normal outdoor activities whenever they smell smoke or can see smoke near ground level in their immediate area.

Please don't use swamp coolers because they bring the smoke in. The heavy smoke impacts are during the day between 5:00 am - 1:00 pm, as the valley heats up. Today it spiked quickly and then dissipated. At nighttime keep the house cool and don't turn the water cooler on till noon. If you know somebody that needs to avoid smoke, take action.

In town the senior center has been open to assist people with breathing issues.

Dave held up an air quality chart. Smoke monitoring equipment has been set up around the fire in various locations to monitor for small particulates associated with smoke. We are posting this on our website which shows 9 days of measurements. The air quality has been unhealthy for sensitive groups 3 out of the 9 days. Sensitive groups include the young, seniors and people with pre-existing conditions.

We have been on daily phone calls with FS and other air districts to lessen the smoke impacts. We want to see the heavy smoke go away so we have encouraged them to do the burnout operations during good air patterns. We are trying to shorten the duration of the event.

We will issue health advisories when needed. Long term you may want to consider an air conditioner. The Kern Valley is located in a bottom drainage which brings in the smoke.

Amy Goriesky, Kern County Public Health – Ways to stay healthy with the smoke

Yes, there are health concerns with the smoke. It can be simple impacts as eye and throat irritants, to more serious effects to bronchitis, COPD, or asthma. The smoke can also impact the immune

system. Some of the symptoms from heavy smoke exposure can be difficulty breathing, arrhythmias, chest pain, angina, headaches, nausea and blurred vision.

The populations that are going to be more sensitive will be citizens with asthma and pre-existing conditions, the elderly, young children and pregnant women. Pay attention to the health symptoms like a persistent cough that is ongoing, chest pain tightness and light headedness. If you experience any of these seek attention from a health provider.

Strategies to reduce the impacts

Don't go out for a nice brisk walk when the smoke level is high. Create a clean room in your house and close the windows and doors. Open your house up in the afternoon when the smoke dissipates. Don't do indoor pollutants such as candles, using the dryer, avoid smoking, etc. Everyone is going to be affected. What we are trying to bring attention to is the symptoms you need to be aware of.

Priscilla Summers, Western Divide DR – FS mandates; why are we doing this?

Paul Gibbs led a very good discussion earlier, and Deb described fire's natural role in the Sierra Nevada. Large fires are not good out there. Those are not desirable results we want on the landscape. The McNally and other fires have greatly impacted your community and your health. During these fires some areas were closed on the forest and those are the types of severe fires that are the associated events we don't want.

Extreme wildfire risks human lives and the natural resources people need and value, such as clean, abundant water; clean air; fish and wildlife habitat; open space for recreation; and other forest products and services.

I chose to manage this fire based on fuel moisture, the fuels in the area, previous fire history and the barriers they provided. I'm keyed in on results and Forest Service manual direction to manage all of the natural resources out there such as trees, spotted owls, historic cabins, private property. As a line officer I am responsible and obligated to protect all of these things.

One of the resources to consider is the impact on people. I know that these fire management decisions have real impacts for you, the visitors to the area and tourism. My mother had COPD for years and I understand air quality impacts to human life. You are getting the brunt of the activity and fire management in the Golden Trout Wilderness. Unfortunately there is a lot of acreage that needs to burn and we are going to produce a lot of smoke in the upcoming days.

Firefighter safety is always my number one concern. After these fires this wilderness landscape will be much safer for the public to visit. This was another factor in my decision. Thank you for your patience. We're doing what we can to minimize the smoke in collaboration with the California air quality districts.

Questions and Answers

Q. Why does this burned area have to be so large? It's larger than any of the other burned sites. We want to go out and exercise. I wake up in the morning and I smell it. You are letting this affect our community since you don't live here.

A. Priscilla: This year we have excellent burning conditions. We wanted to start off with the fire having boundaries based on the previous fires in the area. The impacts are dramatic relative to other years. Another reason is firefighter safety since there are not a lot of places to put our firefighters into to stop the fire. The wilderness is very remote.

Q. Can someone answer this lady's questions regarding how much rock is out there and explain the strategies working with the San Joaquin Valley Air Quality District to manage the fire.

A. Priscilla: We work with the California air quality districts and they advise us on the air dispersal models. We also consult on the timing to release aerial ping pong balls which start small fires in the wilderness. This technique minimizes the smoke. We will continue to do this to head off the front of the fire so it does not emit much smoke. I am trying to manage the fire to lessen the air quality impacts on people.

Supervisor McQuiston's office stated that, "we have worked closely with these agencies to open the Lake Isabella senior center for families in need of clean air. We work daily with Kern County to provide another resource for families while the agencies fight this fire".

Q. Is there any possibility that these fires could be handled differently or at another time? Could these fires be handled earlier in the season?

A. Paul Gibbs: The ignition point needs to begin from a lightning strike. Our regulations allow us to manage these fires from lightning strikes and we have limited windows to take action. Earlier in the season it is too wet and we do not have thunderstorms which cause the lightning strikes.

Q. We have had 3-4 changes in philosophy that affect our wilderness and they have all been upwind of the Kern Valley. You indicated that this was your decision and discretion. This valley is a guinea pig and retirees don't have the resources to get air conditioners. They can't change. We have children who cannot play sports because of the smoke. We have businesses that have to shut down for employees. If these lightning fires were moving toward Porterville you would put it out. You made choices to impact this community, the animals and the creation of a moonscape out there.

A. Priscilla No, you are not guinea pigs and the fire is not creating a moonscape. The Lion fire is successfully staying on the ground and not going up into the trees. This moderate burn allows us to maintain the spotted owl protection areas and the protection of other plant and animal species which is doing great things for the resources. My job is to maintain the plant and animal habitats and keep the ecosystem intact with this type of management.

Each day there are numerous questions to discuss. Each day we are trying to slow the fire down to lessen the smoke impacts. The dilemma is: (1) do we speed things up to produce more smoke for a shorter time, or (2) do we slow down and have impacts over a longer duration?

We have shown you an overview with the fire progression map. Today the fire is now at 14,000 acres. We have 6-8,000 acres left to burn for our goal of 22,000 acres. It's hard to predict however, if we will have good smoke dispersal in the upcoming days. If we do have good smoke dispersal we will continue to burn. We're hoping in the next 10 days that the big smoke production will be over.

Public comment

We live in an ecosystem that has fire. The Kern Valley a beautiful area and that is why we chose to live here. Sometimes we have to expect tradeoffs and expect smoke. Good job Forest Service. Good job Priscilla.

Q. I don't see a lot of education first hand for public health. I don't see where the hospitals are getting involved regarding the right tools for the public to use. What are you doing for the visitors that are being affected who are tent camping around the lake? I don't see a consistency in education. Why aren't you preparing people? I saw two different masks this week that are not effective.

A. Amy: That is a great recommendation. We are interested in developing public service announcements (PSA). I cannot recommend using the masks. A part of the problem is the masks require a fit test to be of benefit and the masks must be entirely sealed. I don't see a benefit for a mask in this community. The soft masks are useless.

Public comment

I work with Fish and Wildlife Service and have worked on the Little Kern Golden Trout restoration for years. I am very familiar with these areas in the Golden Trout Wilderness. There are so many downed logs back there that the trails have been closed for over 15 years.

I like the idea of providing more ideas for the folks that are suffering.

I would like to thank you for managing the fire. In the areas where the fire is heading these are the only fish populations of the Little Kern Golden Trout on earth. This low intensity fire is the best thing to protect this species. During the McNally we lost many fish from the fire's heat, and the after effects of the siltation in the creeks.

Q. What are we doing about the senior center? We need to find solutions to get folks out of the smoke. What about transportation for the public beginning at 5 am? Should we be offering rides?

A. Lori Acton from Jon McQuiston's Office: I can make a call tomorrow to find out what we can do.

Q. Do you have kiosks to get information out?

A. Cindy Thill: Yes, fire information supplied us with flyers which were delivered to businesses to hand out. Our trap lines are up to 40 places. We also use Inciweb.org to post information daily at 9:00 a.m. News releases are also sent out to the public which reach eighty different media. We're trying to also get going on twitter.

Public comment

I want to thank all of your guys for your courage to get a low intensity fire in there that will save this valley from a big burn that will impact all of us. Good job, appreciate it.

Q. Is the back firing necessary?

A. Paul Gibbs: Yes, it is. What we are igniting areas with fire which helps to mitigate the fires effects including smoke. We start fire high up and this allows the fire to burn downhill. This moderates its intensity and its smoke production.

Q. How long will you be doing this and how long will we be in this condition?

A. Paul Gibbs: There are many variables. We trying to determine whether to go quicker, or go slower which impacts the smoke. We're looking to continue burning for 10 days barring unforeseen weather.

Q. If I understood you, out of the 9 days the fire has been burning we have had 3 unhealthy days for sensitive groups.

A. Dave Jones: The models are designed for city pollution. We're dealing with 1 type of pollutant – smoke. What you are seeing is all smoke related. The smoke comes in 5-6 hours a day which is above what you should be breathing. Young children are growing and have sensitive lungs which we need to be concerned about. If you are healthy, as long as you are not running you are OK. If you are sensitive, you should not be out in the smoke.

The air quality monitors have been in place for over 5 years and are showing similar impacts. We are not seeing the same impacts in the San Joaquin Valley however; it has been going over into the Inyo basin. Our analysis shows that burning 400 acres vs. 1,000 acres, the smoke impacts to the Kern Valley were the same.

A weather pattern is coming in on the weekend and we will continue to monitor conditions every day. All the air quality monitors have links for your viewing which are available at Inciweb.org. Kern 39 is the monitor located here in the Kern Valley.

Q. Can you get more information to the radio stations in Ridgecrest?

A. Yes, we will include them in our public outreach efforts.