Managing Wildland Fires in National Parks

The National Park Service has evolved from *suppressing* fire to *managing* fire.
All fires are different. Fire managers evaluate each one and determine the safest, most effective, and cost efficient strategies to manage it. Firefighter and public safety is always the top priority. Fires will always be suppressed where they threaten life or property. In other areas fires may be managed to burn as naturally as possible.

All fires are closely monitored, and a variety of strategies may be used on different areas of a fire as needed.

Depending on location, fires may be monitored on the ground or by air.

Firefighters will build a fireline (an area free of burnable vegetation) and use water or retardant to help suppress the fire perimeter in areas where it is threatening life or property.

In some areas, firefighters may confine a portion of the fire's spread by clearing a fireline or burning out (igniting a backfire along the inner edge of a fireline) to starve the fire of fuel.

Helicopters and airtankers may be used to drop water to cool some areas of the fire.

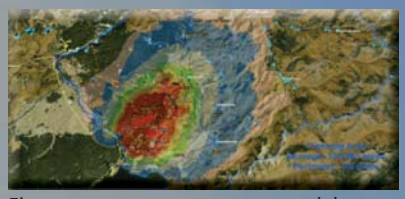
Firefighters use minimum impact tactics like using existing trails, roads, rivers, or rocky outcroppings as firelines when possible to reduce impacts on park resources.

Firefighters may protect sensitive resources like historic cabins with protective wrapping or sprinklers and by thinning fuels in the area.

Sometimes fire managers use prescribed fire to mimic the natural role of lightning fires. These fires are used to meet specific objectives and are only ignited when favorable weather exists.

Chainsaws or mechanical equipment may be used to thin vegetation in areas. This helps prevent large, intense wildfires. Sometimes vegetation is piled and burned when conditions are favorable.

Fire size and activity vary with changes in weather, topography, and vegetation.



Fire managers use computer models to help predict fire behavior and spread based on current and historic information.

Hot spots within the fire's perimeter may burn until put out by rain or snow.

After a fire, the forest is reborn in the nutrient rich ash that fertilizes the soil. Many plants are fire-adapted and some depend on fire for reproduction.

Many animals like to forage along the edges of burned areas and find cover in unburned areas. Standing dead trees provide habitat for cavity-nesting birds.

You may see smoke during your visit to the park. Fire managers work with state and local agencies to montor smoke impacts. Smoke may settle when air temperatures cool at night and in the early morning hours. Smoke usually lifts during the day. Breathing smoke is not healthy for anyone, but some people are at greater risk, including people with heart or lung disease, children, and the elderly. If it looks smoky, you may want to limit or eliminate exercise or other outdoor activities.

www.nps.gov/fire