San Miguel Wildland Fire

Fire belongs in the mountain Southwest and unless the peaks flatten, the monsoon evaporates, the seasons homogenize, or the biota vanishes, those fires will continue.

Steven Pyne

Fire (and smoke) vary with changes in weather, topography, and elevation. Some smoke is inevitable and may settle into canyons and low lying areas when air temperatures cool at night and in the early morning. Smoke typically lifts during the day.

This lightning-ignited wildland fire was discovered on July 2, 2009. Bandelier National Monument and the Sante Fe National Forest are cooperatively managing the San Miguel Wildland Fire for resource benefits.

This fire is burning in remote wilderness, where it poses no threats to life, safety, or property. It is burning in Ponderosa pine, piñon, juniper, and grass.

Fire managers are monitoring this fire as it progresses naturally. This slow-moving fire is clearing out dead fuels on the forest floor, creating a healthy mosaic of burned and unburned forest. Wildlife will benefit from increased habitat diversity.

This fire is also creating a natural fuel break which will help slow the intensity and spread of large, intense wildfires in the future.

By mid-July, fire activity diminished and the fire has grown to 1,635 acres. The fire continues to be monitored by firefighters on the ground and by aircraft. If weather and fuel conditions become aligned, fire activity will increase.

Managing wildland fire requires land managers to balance risks and benefits in an ever-changing environment. Fire managers use the right response, at the right time, for the right reasons.

Firefighters use natural features like canyons and rocky terrain as fuel breaks, increasing their efficiency in constructing fireline, and mitigating safety risks by reducing the number of firefighters working in an area.

Fires burn at different intensities, creating a mosaic pattern across the landscape, increasing habitat diversity and breaking up continuous fuels which can limit or slow the progression of large, unwanted wildfires.

Previously burned areas reduce the amount of available fuels to prevent fire spread. This area burned in the 1996 Dome Fire has a good clean understory, keeping fire contained to a low-intensity surface fire.

Not all of the forest burns at once. The most active part of the fire is usually along the perimeter, which can vary from a few hundred feet to several acres in size. Smoke can vary depending on the amount of active fire perimeter.

Members of the Santa Fé Hotshot's dig fireline with handtools while working within in the wilderness areas. Fire managers can use a variety of tactics to limit the spread of a portion of the fire while continuing to manage the fire for resource objectives.

After a fire, the forest is reborn in the nutrient rich ash that fertilizes the soil. Many plants are fire-adapted including this Ponderosa pine (on the left in above photo) and some depend on fire for reproduction.

A Single Engine Air Tanker (SEAT) drops water allowing firefighters on the ground to prevent the fire from spreading into Capulin Canyon where the desired resource benefits would not have been achieved.

Park Rangers discuss the ecological benefits of natural fire with visitors.