



## Fire at Lava Beds



### A New Look at Fire

Wildland fire is one of the most powerful forces of nature and is often viewed as purely destructive. However, within the last few decades, scientific research has enlightened land managers to the ecological importance of fire in wild ecosystems. In wild areas such as Lava Beds, fire management is reintroducing fire to protect developed areas and restore ecosystem health.

### A Natural Process

Periodic wildfires in the lava beds once burned away plant litter and undergrowth regularly. As a result, most fires crept along the ground and were not hot enough to do long-term damage to plant communities. Burning vegetation recycled nutrients into the soil.

Wildfires also burned in a “mosaic” pattern, following fuel beds and natural barriers such as lava outcroppings.

Patches of ground were cleared for new vegetation, providing nutritious browse for wildlife. Some older vegetation was left behind, providing adequate cover for small animals.

### A Land Without Fire

From the 1920’s to the late 1970’s, all fires at Lava Beds were suppressed. The belief was that all wildfire was “bad”. Natural fuels are now present in excessive amounts that can produce more intense wildfires. These fires are more difficult to control and pose a greater threat to life and property than periodic ground fires.

The lack of fire has also been detrimental to the plants of Lava Beds. The plant community of bitterbrush and other shrubs is now overgrown, with little new growth. New bitterbrush sprouts are a primary forage for the monument’s deer population.

The ponderosa pines along the monument’s southern boundary have thick bark when mature, and are generally resistant to periodic ground fires. However, aging shrubs now provide an abundance of “ladder fuels” that allow fire to climb higher into large trees and kill them.

The lack of periodic fire to burn away the understory has also inhibited the growth of new ponderosa pines. These trees require clear ground with minimal competition for nutrients and sunlight in order to reproduce.

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## Fire Management At Lava Beds

The National Park Service recognizes that natural forces should be the primary influences on park ecosystems. The fire management program at Lava Beds is actively engaged in reintroducing fire through two methods: *wildland fire use* and *prescribed fire*.

### Wildland Fire Use

If weather conditions will permit lightning-ignited fire to burn at the proper intensity to benefit rather than damage natural resources, managers can allow fires to burn. If threats are too great, the fire will be suppressed entirely, or minimum suppression tactics may be used to contain the fire within safe boundaries.

### Prescribed Fire

It is difficult for nature to catch up with fifty years of fire suppression. For this reason, fire management personnel prescribe fire to treat unhealthy landscapes, just like a doctor prescribes medication to treat illnesses.

Under strict weather and fuel conditions, managers selectively ignite areas in an effort to reduce heavy fuel loads and reintroduce fire. Reduction of fuels helps managers control future wildfires and protect life and property. The monument's boundaries and developed areas are primary targets for prescribed fire.

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## Safety

Public safety and the protection of property and important natural and cultural resources are the top priorities of the fire management program. Fire personnel monitor weather and fuel conditions to predict how a fire is going to behave. Fire personnel then determine whether it is safe to ignite a prescribed burn or manage a lightning-caused fire for ecosystem health as a wildland fire use project. When safety and resource benefits are in question, all natural fires are suppressed and prescribed fire projects postponed.

All human-caused fires in the monument are suppressed. Please do not leave your campfire unattended or smoke while walking on trails; even accidental human-caused fires can carry significant fines.

During a fire, you may encounter smoke and temporary trail closures. We urge you to obey all warning signs for your safety and the safety of fire personnel.

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## For More Information

If you have any questions or would like more information about the fire management program at Lava Beds, please visit the Fire Management Office in the headquarters area, or contact the office by phone at 530-667-8122.

If you would like to visit one of the areas where fire has been reintroduced, we would be happy to assist you. Thank you for your support as we bring the natural process of fire back to Lava Beds.