



United States Department of the Interior



FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
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IN REPLY REFER TO:
FWS/R8/Refuges/Fire

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Memorandum

To: Chief, Branch of Fire Management

From: Acting Regional Director, Pacific Southwest Region
Sacramento, California

Subject: Tract 17 Declared Wildfire Review Report

On September 17, 2014, a prescribed burn implemented by the Sacramento NWRC staff, on Tract 17 of the refuge escaped control lines and was declared a wildfire. The burn was conducted on a 60-acre grassland unit to reduce hazardous fuel loadings and provide quality browse for waterfowl. The escaped fire grew quickly and burned a total of 410 acres before it was controlled; 21 of the 410 acres were off-refuge. No injuries occurred on the incident; however, the Refuge Headquarters was evacuated and damage to power poles briefly disrupted power to the town of Willows. Smoke briefly impacted I-5 and Highway 99W.

Per the policy outlined in the Interagency Prescribed Fire Planning and Implementation Procedures Guide and the FWS Fire Management Handbook, an interagency review team convened in early October to analyze the incident, identify the elements that led to the escape, and provide recommendations for improvement of the fire management program. This Declared Wildfire Document is attached.

The Review Team found that the following contributed significantly to the escape and wildfire declaration:

- The programmatic burn plan and the supplemental burn day incident action plan did not contain adequate site-specific information regarding dominant fuel models, prescription, and firing and holding strategies and tactics.
- Implementation decisions were based on incorrect weather predictions (use of general vs. spot weather forecast) and the wind speed exceeded the burning prescription one hour after ignition, but was not recognized by on-site personnel. Weather readings taken during the burn were insufficient to detect changes in wind speed that put the burn out of prescription.
- Decisions to alter conventional firing strategies, although justified, increased the risk of escape and were not sufficiently mitigated.

- Both engines ran out of water at a critical point during initial suppression efforts; water resources were not used to their fullest potential. Also, access issues significantly increased water refill turnaround times and restricted movement of equipment within the unit.

Fire severity conditions and preparedness levels were not a factor in the escape. The escape was a result of a combination of very site specific circumstances coming together. Also, a strategically-placed prescribed burn implemented in June 2014 inhibited fire spread and likely prevented damage to the Refuge Complex headquarters from the Tract 17 fire.

The attached document provides several recommendations for mitigating the findings listed above and improving the Zone's fire management program. A discussion with all of the fire management officers in the Region is planned in the next two weeks with the intent that learning opportunities from this incident will be Region-wide.

Please call Jessica Wade, Deputy Regional Fire Management Coordinator, at 916-978-6181 if you have any questions.