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Fire this time: Another burn at wildlife refuge

BY JAMES GILBERT
Mar 8, 2004

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A small cluster of federal land management agencies set ablaze a several-acre controlled burn at the Imperial National Wildlife Refuge early Sunday morning.

Beginning around 10 a.m. in a 14-acre field the refuge owns, wildland firefighting crews from the various agencies, using hand-held burners, touched off dense vegetation, sending orange flames leaping 20 to 30 feet in the air and a plume of black smoke billowing into the sky.



Nicholas Jose of BLM surveys the trail of fire as he continues to ignite it. Sun photo by Alfred J. Hernandez.

"It's going to burn rather quickly, and the heat from the fire is going to be intense," said Chris Wilcox, assistant fire management officer for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, who was part of one of the fire crews.

"This area hasn't been burned in many years and has become so overgrown with salt cedar cattails and fragments that many of the wildlife species can't access it because it's so thick," said said refuge manager Ken Edwards.

Meanwhile, firefighters walked the perimeter of the burn area using their shovels to put out small flare-ups, while others stood by in nearby water trucks and boats. A helicopter even flew overhead carrying a large water bucket.

The fire, which left only left smoking branches on small shrubs and a charred, blackened ground, burned for about an hour.

"It was a complete success in that we were able to accomplish all of our management objectives," Edwards said.

Not only was the burn necessary to promote new growth of vegetation for birds that utilize the habitats, it's also part of an eight-year study to determine the effects of prescribed fires on the Yuma Clapper Rail, an endangered bird.

"The preliminary indications look good," said Courtney Conway, a research biologist from the U.S. Geological Survey and a professor at the University of Arizona. "From the few fires we've done, and the habitats we've opened up, not only are Yuma Clapper Rails coming into this area, so are other rails, and in great numbers."

"Fire doesn't kill the native plants, so the main objective is to enhance the habitat for wildlife, meaning we will be burning off the old dense vegetation, which returns nutrients to the soil and stimulates new growth," Edwards said.

Conway said flooding from the Colorado River once controlled the area's ecosystem, by washing away the dead and overgrown vegetation. He's now hopeful controlled burns will prove to be a useful way of restoring native species and habitats.

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Wilcox added now that the vegetation that once choked the area off has been burned out, wildlife should return to the area within a week.

"We should see animals and other wildlife back in the area, using it again," he said.

Sunday's blaze was the second time in as many months the land agencies had tried conducting the burn. Edwards said had weather conditions not been right, the burn would have been postponed until next year.

"Prescribed burning is not an exact science, Edwards said. "There can always be an unexpected, unpredictable weather anomaly that can cause a fire to do something that could cause the fire to do something we didn't anticipate."

"We aren't working in a laboratory environment, we're working with mother nature," Wilcox said. "We're dealing with so many dynamics involving weather conditions that play a role in fire behavior."

The winter months are the best time of the year to conduct the burns, according to Edwards, because agency biologist have determined birds haven't begun their nesting season yet.

"If we hadn't been able to carry out the burn today, the latest we could have conducted it was the middle of March," Edwards said. " That's primarily due to the start of nesting season and we don't ever want to interfere with that. If we don't get the burn done before then, we won't be doing it this year."

While it's unfortunate, Edwards said there is no way to clear all the animals for the area of the burn, and as a result, some will die.

"There is certainly some wildlife in there now, but the vast majority of those animals will be able to leave the area and go to a nearby habitat," Edwards said. "But there is a possibility that there may be some that would not be able to escape, hopefully it would be a very small percentage."

James Gilbert can be reached at jgilbert@yumasun.com or 539-6854.

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