



FIRE & VEGETATION MANAGEMENT

Banff, Yoho & Kootenay National Parks

Prescribed Fire Frequently Asked Questions

Why use prescribed fire?

Many of the ecosystems within national parks are fire adapted. In these ecosystems, fire helps maintain forest health and biodiversity. Parks Canada uses carefully planned prescribed fire to safely restore and maintain this important ecological process.

Prescribed fires do important work that pays dividends for decades. For example, they help maintain good habitat for many large mammals, particularly elk, moose, sheep, deer, wolves and bears. Prescribed fire also helps control populations of insects such as mountain pine beetle and reduces the threat of wildfire to communities and neighbouring lands.

What exactly do you mean by “prescribed” fire?

A prescribed fire is an intentional fire planned and managed by fire specialists. A “prescription” describes the conditions and procedures necessary to burn safely and effectively.

Parks Canada’s fire specialists take into account weather, type of vegetation, terrain and fire behaviour when writing a prescription. They define the boundary of the fire using natural barriers, such as cliffs and wetlands, combined with manmade features, such as roads and constructed fuel breaks. Finally, the team

outlines the conditions under which the prescription can be used. When these conditions are met, the team is ready for action.

How are prescribed fires controlled in National Parks?

Fire specialists use roads, trails and natural barriers such as rivers, cliffs, avalanche slopes, and recently burned forest to help contain fire spread. To ensure that fire does not spread outside desired areas, trees and shrubs may be cleared to supplement existing barriers.

During a burn, firefighters have fire fighting equipment in place to contain the fire within the boundaries and conditions outlined in the prescription. Helicopters are used to monitor the fire’s progress. Additional aircraft, crews and equipment are on standby to assist with control if required.

What about smoke?

We can’t eliminate smoke but great efforts are taken to reduce smoke impacts. Fire specialists light prescribed fires only on days when prevailing winds will carry smoke away effectively. Depending on wind speed and direction and how well the smoke vents upward, some smoke may linger on subsequent days during the smouldering period of the fire.

While prescribed fire permits some control over smoke, unpredicted changes in weather can affect how well smoke disperses. However, prescribed fires provide insurance against future larger wildfires and the smoke they produce. It's a choice between some fire and smoke now or a lot more later on.

Are there any health risks from smoke?

According to health authorities, the health risk from short periods of exposure to smoke is low for the general public. Children and the elderly are more susceptible to smoke effects. People with heart or lung disease are at a higher risk and should consult their physicians as required. For more information go to: <http://www.interiorhealth.ca/Health+and+Safety/Emergency+Info/Forest+Fires.htm>.

Parks Canada has a smoke notification list for those who are extremely sensitive to smoke and would like advance warning of 2006 burning operations in the Lake Louise, Yoho and Kootenay area. Please call (250) 343-6107 to be included on this list.

Will there be impacts to park users?

During burning operations there may be speed reductions along nearby roads due to reduced visibility. Local trails and facilities could have short-term closures in place for safety reasons. The duration of

any required closures will be kept to a minimum.

How does a prescribed fire affect wildlife?

In most cases, prescribed fires kill a relatively small percentage of wildlife. Large animals usually move out of a fire's path. Smaller animals may take refuge in underground burrows or thick cover on the forest floor. Most animals here evolved with fire and rely on it to renew the varied habitats they depend on.

How can I find out more about Parks Canada's prescribed fire program?

Information on prescribed fires and other fire management projects is available at park information centres and on park websites:

- www.pc.gc.ca/yoho
- www.pc.gc.ca/kootenay
- www.pc.gc.ca/banff

To be included on our contact list for upcoming prescribed fires, contact Lori Horrocks, Fire Communications Officer, Parks Canada, ph. (250) 343-6107, or email lori.horrocks@pc.gc.ca.

For media enquiries, please contact Janet Klock, Media and Executive Services, Parks Canada, ph. (403) 522-1277, or email janet.klock@pc.gc.ca.

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