

Fire Management Records

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Yosemite National Park Archives

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<http://www.nps.gov/yose/historyculture/collections.htm>

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Descriptive Summary

Title: Fire Management Records

Dates: 1930-2010

Collection Number: YCN: 1017 (YOSE 232940)

Creator/Collector:

Extent: 71.8 LF

Online items available  https://voro.cdlib.org/user-pdf-dav/yosnpa/FINAL_FMO_FA_ICMS_2012_11_10.pdf

Repository: Yosemite National Park Archives

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Abstract: The collection contains materials relating to the park's fire program and details the fires that occurred in Yosemite National Park. The records were created by Yosemite's fire program between 1930 and 2010 with the bulk of the material dating from 1969-1999 being compiled and created by the Fire Management Office. Yosemite National Park has been at the forefront of fire management, and its records exhibit the evolution of National Park Service fire policy, especially in relation to Yosemite's prescribed fire program. The strength of the collection is found in the thorough assemblage of incident reports, which comprise final, concise reports for every fire that occurred in the park between 1931 and 1999. When read alongside administrative files and various fire management planning documents, these records provide an overview of decades of fire management strategies and of the impact that these shifting policies have had upon Yosemite National Park's ecology and resources. The collection's contents include fire incident reports (both wildland and structural), fire inspections, annual fire season reports, search and rescue reports, prescribed fire plans and research, administrative files, fire management plans and planning documents, fire narratives, weather data, correspondence, cooperative agreements, newspaper articles, press releases, fire perimeter maps, charts, photographs, and materials relating to high water incidents and major fires in Yosemite National Park. Also included in the collection are Crane Flat Lookout and Henness Ridge Lookout visitor registers, panoramic lookout photographs from a United States Forest Service (USFS) project in the 1930s, and the Yosemite fire atlases, which contain maps and statistics related to park-wide fire control between 1930 and 1970. Please note that all series and subseries have accompanying scope and content descriptions. It is also important to note that Yosemite's fire program was not given the title of Fire Management Office (FMO) until the 1980s; nevertheless, for consistency this document refers to the park fire program as the Fire Management Office or FMO throughout the collection.

Language of Material: English

Access

No restrictions

Preferred Citation

Fire Management Records. Yosemite National Park Archives

Acquisition Information

The collection was created by the Yosemite fire program between 1930 and 2011. The title of Fire Management Office (FMO) did not occur until the 1980s, nevertheless, for consistency and since the majority of accessions were received later from the Fire Management Office, the creator of the records is referred to as the Fire Management Office throughout the collection. The materials were deposited in the archives in several batches from 1992 to 2012, with the bulk of the material arriving in 2008. The collection has nine associated accession numbers: YOSE-5737, YOSE-5739, YOSE-5957, YOSE-6362, YOSE-6386, YOSE-7144, YOSE-7179, YOSE-7184, YOSE-6759. The primary accession number, YOSE-5737, was the first installment of records, and YOSE-7144 was the largest. The initial deposits were first delivered to the Yosemite research library and then sent to the archives. Many of these accessions (YOSE-5737, YOSE-5739, YOSE-5957, YOSE-6362) were part of the Protection Division collection reflecting the management of fire activities by this division and were transferred to the Fire Management Office collection in 2011. Accession, YOSE-6759: Rancheria Fire-Dispatcher's Log, 1948, was discovered in the Protection Division records in February 2012 and added to the fire management office records. Most of the fire management office records were previously stored in the records management storage area in the El Portal warehouse or collected in 2008 from the Fire Management Offices located in Wawona.

Biography/Administrative History

Fire management is integral to the management of Yosemite National Park's natural and cultural resources. Since 1970, National Park Service (NPS) fire policy has shifted from mandating the suppression of all fires toward a strategy that allows certain wildfires and prescribed burns to be used as tools for meeting land management and public safety objectives. Restoring fire to its natural role in Yosemite National Park is now one of the fire management program's highest resource management priorities. Yosemite's fire program presently works out of the main Fire Management Office (FMO) in Yosemite

Valley and is part of the Visitor Protection Division. A continual leader in the implementation of NPS fire management policy, Yosemite's fire management program employs a variety of methods to accomplish fire and resource management objectives, thereby reducing the risk of unwanted fires and providing public safety and resource protection. The program operates under the guidelines of the park's 2004 Fire Management Plan, which leverages strategies that are the result of a half century of fire research and experiential knowledge. A framework for managing wildland and prescribed fires, the plan aims to restore and maintain ecosystems, reduce hazardous fuel loads, protect nearby communities, and safeguard cultural and natural resources. Before Yosemite became a government-protected tract in 1864, Native Americans managed fires strategically, burning meadows in order to amplify acorn and grass harvests. The cessation of Native American burning coincided with the enforcement of a fire suppression philosophy inherited from the Army and the U. S. Forest Service (USFS), upon which the National Park Service relied for assistance in firefighting. Yosemite became a national park in 1890 and part of the NPS when it was established in 1916. All fires in Yosemite were suppressed since the 1920s and in some parts since the mid-19th century, regardless of size or location. In addition to increasing fire hazards due to the accumulation of vegetation and woody debris (fuel layers), this century-long policy of suppression has severely altered park vegetation and wildlife ecosystems, especially in the meadows of Yosemite Valley and the Giant Sequoia groves, which rely upon fires to reproduce. Due to the early NPS reliance upon the USFS for fire control, Yosemite had no fire personnel until 1928, when John D. Coffman was hired as the first Yosemite Fire Control Expert. In 1929 under Coffman, the NPS initiated a fire control plan distinctive to the park service but derived from the USFS plan. The Crane Flat Lookout was built in 1931 to improve fire recognition and starting in 1933, New Deal programs provided the NPS with resources to approach fire management more independently. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) maintained fire breaks, suppressed forest fires, and constructed the Henness Ridge Fire Lookout and Miguel Meadow Guard Station in 1934. Fire management in the NPS in the 1940s and 1950s continued to be challenging because of lack of resources. Around this time, wildland and structural fire responsibilities were moved from the Chief of Forestry office in the Maintenance Division to a new branch under the Visitor Protection Division. This staff was responsible for the suppression of wildfires, and fighting structural fires, as well as assisting with search and rescue operations. Yosemite did not have any major fires during this period and public education programs stressed fire prevention because of the large number of human-caused fires. The majority of the fires into the 1960s were caused by lightning and individuals and were mostly inconsequential. Besides the Rancheria Mountain fire of 1948, a Class "E" fire and the largest, most costly fire on record to date, larger fires didn't begin to appear until the late 1960s—a consequence of the emphasis placed upon fire suppression during the early and mid-twentieth century. In the meantime, the NPS reassessed its fire management strategies. Yosemite discovered that suppression of natural fires disrupted ecosystems and altered park vegetation and wildlife habitat, thereby diminishing visitor experience. Still, changes to the fire suppression policy were only seriously begun because of the recommendations of the Leopold Committee in 1963, which advocated for the restoration of park ecosystems through a variety of mechanisms, including prescribed fires. It was the Committee's vision that each park be restored, as nearly as possible, to the conditions that existed when Europeans first visited the area. In Yosemite, the recommendation heralded a return to a landscape similar to the one that Native Americans cultivated. The resonating natural resource management vision of the Leopold Committee inspired the NPS Green Book in 1968. Revolutionizing NPS policy, the Green Book recommended that fires be allowed to burn. The rich environment of fire research and science theory at UC Berkeley (led by Doctor Harold Biswell) also influenced NPS fire policies, especially at nearby Yosemite. Throughout the 1960s, experiments in controlled burning showed a marked increase in the reproduction of Giant Sequoias, a treasured natural resource in Yosemite. These scientific and aesthetic developments instigated a new fire management philosophy that revolved around wildland fires and prescribed fires. When wildland fires, ignited by lightning, occur in certain designated areas of the park, they are allowed to burn. Lit by resource managers, prescribed fires are the deliberate application of fire to wildlands in order to achieve specific resource management objectives. Yosemite became one of the first national parks to introduce prescribed fire into its mixed conifer forests and meadows, leading the development of the NPS prescribed burn program. In 1968 Yosemite hired Robert Barbee, the park's first natural resource manager, to research and draft a fire management plan that incorporated the new burning policies. The plan was completed in 1969 and quickly gained momentum with foresters and other naturalists. By 1970, the first prescribed burns occurred in Foresta Village and Mariposa Grove, initiating the use of Prescribed Natural Fires (PNFs) in Yosemite. In 1972 the park began to allow naturally-ignited wildland fires in the higher elevations to burn (following on the heels of Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks). Barbee and Biswell were instrumental in the design and implementation of the first prescribed fire program (instituted by the summer of 1970). The program is founded on concepts of ecosystem management and uses three tools to maintain ecological stability and biological diversity: prescribed fires, mechanical thinning, and wildland (natural) fires. In 1970, prompted by the new National Environmental Policy Act and inspired by the 1968 Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, Barbee authored Yosemite's new Environmental Restoration Plan. Suggesting that Yosemite's ecological problems could be mitigated through the manipulation of planned fires, this plan reflected the national ecological mood, which supported the scientific guidance of NPS policies and the federal regulation of environmental issues. Prior to the early 1970s, most members of the fire staff were trained as foresters

instead of as natural scientists. The change in fire policy prompted a departmental reorganization. In 1969, an office was created in Wawona to house the prescribed fire program, led by Barbee. This program, still in existence today, is responsible for designing and implementing Yosemite's prescribed burning program, as well as for managing fire research, educating the public, manipulating natural wildfires to accomplish environmental restoration, and reducing fire hazards. The office operates under the Fire Management branch of the Protection Division but also works closely with the Division of Resources Management and Science. The establishment of the Wawona office prompted the separation of wildland and structural fire management and, thus, their records. The urgent, emergency response required for structural fires differed extensively from the resource management approach of wildland fires. Therefore, the time-sensitive management of suppressed fires and emergency situations continued to be based out of the Fire Management Office in Yosemite Valley. Despite the park's embrace of prescribed burning, fire staff will suppress all fires if weather and environmental conditions are not ideal, if the fire was human-caused, or if its location is in a Fire Suppression Zone (17% of park). This zone includes developed areas and ranges with high fuel loads. An NPS-wide prescribed fire program took longer to gain momentum because of political pressure and the public's response to the risk of fire. The Boise Interagency Fire Center (BIFC) was established in 1969 to unite federal land management divisions in their cause. The NPS Fire Management Staff Directive 76-12 of 1976 articulated the use of fire in NPS fire management programs and explained terminology and procedures for visitors and staff alike. This order and the efforts of the BIFC led to the development of the NPS's Fire Policy Directive (NPS-18) in 1977, which superseded all previous policies and changed the face of fire management. The mandate outlined management strategies, implementation procedures, and guidelines for prescribed burning while emphasizing that the ultimate priority was to protect lives, facilities, and natural and cultural resources. With a NPS-18-approved prescribed fire plan in place and the arrival of Jan van Wagtendonk around 1970, Yosemite became the forerunner in fire management. Van Wagtendonk received his PhD in fire ecology from UC Berkeley, where he studied with Dr Harold Biswell. An expert on planning prescriptions for fires, van Wagtendonk had authored the influential Natural, Conditional, and Prescribed Fire Management Plan of 1979. Prescribed fire was a common practice in Yosemite in the 1970s and by the 1980s they were a leader in wildfire planning and management. A perpetual concern in fire management, the lack of resources, was addressed by the FIREPRO program in 1981. The national program quantified fire management needs and provided guides for achieving resource management goals. FIREPRO was instituted at a fortuitous moment for Yosemite, which entered a 20-year drought cycle in 1985 already heavy with unnaturally- accumulated fuel loads. In 1986, these conditions fermented in the American West to create the worst year in fire history; 1987 was even worse. The August Heat Complex fires of 1987 threatened groves of giant sequoias along with nearby communities, eventually leading to the closure of portions of the park. The intensity of these fire seasons underscores the threat of fire to national parks and highlights the extensive and enduring costs of fire suppression. In 1988, the Fire Management Program was hobbled by the effects of the fires in Yellowstone, where Barbee was now superintendent. The science of fire management became a political issue. On August 23, 1988, under public pressure, NPS director William Penn Mott declared a moratorium on all prescribed burns in national parks. After review, the NPS revised the order NPS-18 and created new fire management guidelines, which required parks to forward fire management plans for approval. Yosemite's Prescribed Fire Program was challenged again in 1990 during another bad fire year in California. In August, a group of fires, including Arch Rock and Steamboat, were ignited by lightning in suppression zones. Efforts failed to stop the spread. Popular areas were threatened, and the park was closed for the first time in history—and during its celebratory centennial summer. Though Yosemite avoided much of the controversy that plagued Yellowstone during its fires, it could not deflect the media, which was still engaged in debating fire management policies in national parks. Nevertheless, instead of derailing the progress of fire management, the NPS responded with renewed vigor and designed new strategies that have been met with evident success over the ensuing decades. On the heels of a big wildfire season in 1994, the NPS completed the revised Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy and Program Review Report in 1995. The goals and actions of this report encourage a proactive, cooperative, uniform, ecological approach to fire management, emphasizing the urgent and enormous task of reintroducing fire to reduce risk and improve ecosystems. The new policy allowed for flexibility in types of fire responses and led to greater cooperation among federal land management agencies. The necessity of interagency coordination was demonstrated during 1996, a calamitous fire year for all of California—and particularly for Yosemite, which suffered severe fire conditions and a large number of lightning-caused fires. Limited resources exacerbated the situation until finally, under a unified NPS and USFS command, the fires (Ackerson Complex) were extinguished. The Structural Fire Program utilizes the fire management suppression strategies of its more well-known relative, the prescribed fire program. The Structural Fire Program operates within fire suppression zones that include communities and areas with a high concentration of forest debris. Fire crews staff both wildland and structural fire engines for these communities, with some crews responding to fire suppression calls as well as to prescribed and wildland fires happening in the park. The helitack crew is also part of the Fire Management branch and operates out of the Crane Flat Fire Lookout. Wildland fires account for the largest helicopter usage in Yosemite. The aviation program supports wildland fire suppression, prescribed fire management, search and rescue, medical evacuations, and administrative operations. Reports for these operations are generated in the Yosemite Valley office and in various

offices around the park. For all of these missions, agreements with other agencies—such as USFS, CAL FIRE, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Mariposa County, and the park’s main concessioner—are in place to provide assistance and promote more effective sharing of resources. By 1997, the effects of decades of fire suppression could be seen in the prevalence and magnitude of fires in the American West, including the Yosemite Complex Fire in Yosemite. The increase in catastrophic fires and the expansion of Wildland Urban Interface Areas (WUI) made interagency cooperation a major fire management objective. Fire education also became vital and sparked the establishment of the Public Information Office (PIO) in 1999 to focus on educating the public about fire management in Yosemite and the ecological advantages of fire. By the year 2000, another series of drought years prompted changes in fire management operations, and prompted new policy development. Yosemite’s fire management policies are guided by the NPS management policies, Director’s Order #18 (1998), and the 2001 Federal Fire Policy. The Director’s Order #18 guides the development of policy relative to fire management and dictates the program requirements for fire management plans. The 1990 Yosemite Fire Management Plan was revised in the Yosemite Fire Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement of March 2004 in compliance with the 2001 Federal Fire Policy. As the working document that guides the fire management program, this plan mandates the increased application of prescribed fire and calls for additional methods of hazardous fuel reduction in order to transform threatened areas into more natural, balanced landscapes. The Operational Fire Management Plan of 2009, which builds on the 2004 plan, is the working document for implementing fire management actions. The existing program includes wildland fire for natural and cultural benefits, wildland fire suppression, prescribed fire, fire prevention, fire education and outreach, fire ecology research, and mechanical methods of reducing fuel loads. The Fire Management Office uses the goals and objectives established in fire management plans to improve planning of prescribed fires and responses to unplanned fire, all the time maintaining public safety as its main priority.

Scope and Content of Collection

The collection is organized into ten series according to record function, original office filing system, type of material, and topic. Most series are arranged either chronologically or by NPS alphanumeric codes as established in the NPS -19 Disposition Schedule. Series I: Fire Incident Reports (Forest & Structural) contains the early fire records, which include forestry reports and exemplifies suppression as the overarching fire management policy. Beginning in 1970, all fire incident reports were divided by category of fire; thus, records after 1970 are split into two series, Series II: Structural Fire Reports and Series III: Wildland Fire Reports. The structural fire records comprise fire inspection, annual, and incident reports. The wildland fire records consist of annual and individual fire reports, as well as documentation related to major fires in Yosemite. Series IV: Non-fire Incident Reports comprises high water reports from the floods of 1995 and 1997 that were filed separately from the fire reports. Series V: Fire Weather Data incorporates disparate weather records found throughout the collection. Series VI: Administrative Files contains central files, correspondence, and general office files that pertain to the administration of fire management in the Yosemite National Park. Materials relating to Yosemite's prescribed fire program originate from a branch office and were organized into Series VII: Prescribed Fire Program. The fire atlases, lookout items, including an Osborne Fire Finder, and panoramic photographs each comprise a separate series due to medium and specialized content.
