

PARK PLANS CONTROLLED BURN IN CATALOOCHEE

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If weather conditions permit, Park managers at Great Smoky Mountains National Park plan to conduct a controlled burn on a cluster of five units totaling approximately 1,230 acres within a 3,580 acre tract of forest in the Cataloochee Valley area of the Park near Maggie Valley, North Carolina.

These operations could begin as early as Tuesday, April 13, and may continue intermittently through April and early May. In order to reduce the amount of smoke produced, managers plan to burn the units individually over several days instead of igniting all five tracts at once.

The goals of this project, dubbed the 'Canadian Top Controlled Burn', are to use fire to reduce forest fuel accumulations and to restore a healthy and diverse eco-system. Fire managers plan to use a series of low-intensity controlled burns over a number of years to restore the composition and open structure of the oak and pine woodlands that occur on upper slopes and ridges within the site. These fire and drought-tolerant natural communities are important to wildlife and overall ecosystem health, and they are in decline throughout the Southern Appalachian region. This series of burns will reduce the number of fire-sensitive trees and shrubs while increasing regeneration of oak and yellow pines, and increase the cover and diversity of native grasses and wildflowers. Over time, this increase in vegetation on the forest floor will improve forage for elk which graze the nearby meadows.

Until the mid-1990's, all wildfires within the Park had been vigorously suppressed for almost 70 years. One consequence of that long-term fire exclusion is that dry mountain slopes and ridges, which were historically covered with oaks and pines, are becoming increasingly dominated by trees and shrubs that are much less resistant to fires and droughts. The new forest has a closed canopy that allows little light to reach the forest floor, resulting in a decline of plant and animal diversity. The planned burn is designed to reduce the density of fire-intolerant species and to promote the regeneration of the oaks and pines.

The area to be burned borders the open meadows of Cataloochee in the center of the Valley. The burn area is contained by Cataloochee and Little Cataloochee Creeks, the Little Cataloochee Trail, and several park roads.

As a precaution, approximately 25 Park firefighters and 2 engines will be assigned to make sure the burn stays within its planned boundaries.

Roads within Cataloochee Valley will remain open to the public. Little Cataloochee Trail will be closed during and after burn operations as firefighters extinguish hot spots along the trail.