



Ocean Beach Fire Program

April 2014

INTRODUCTION

The fire program at Ocean Beach is under review by the National Park Service (NPS) at Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA). The NPS is concerned about the unsafe conditions that result from these fires, the unsustainable level of NPS staff effort required to ensure compliance with the existing rules and regulations, and to keep the beach clean and safe for visitors.

This document describes the existing beach fire policy, reasons why the program is being reevaluated, and a description of NPS's proposal to implement a Revised Pilot Program for Ocean Beach fires.

PROGRAM SUMMARY

The Revised Pilot Program (described in more detail later in this document) would include some minor changes to the existing program, implement a monitoring and data collection system, include a public outreach and education campaign, and would utilize success indicators to determine whether or not the program was successful. The program would be in place from Memorial Day weekend (May 23, 2014) to Labor Day (September 1, 2014). Once the data that was collected is assessed, NPS will evaluate what the next steps for the Ocean Beach fire program would



be, which may include continuing the revised pilot program, making further program modifications, or no longer allowing fires on the beach.

The public is invited to submit comments on this proposed program between Monday, April 21 and Friday, May 16, 2014.

BACKGROUND

Ocean Beach is a 3.5-mile long oceanfront that, despite oftentimes being cloaked in fog, chilly and damp, is extremely popular with local residents as well as tourists visiting from a wide variety of places. Visitors enjoy the beach for walking, running, picnicking, surfing or just

appreciating the expansive views of the ocean landscape. The beach also has natural occurring sand dunes and is a resting site for the federally threatened Western Snowy Plover.

When GGNRA was established in 1972, the park inherited a long-standing San Francisco tradition of open beach fires along the 3.5-mile Ocean Beach corridor. Code of Federal Regulations Section 2.13(a)(1) promulgated on June 30, 1983 empowered individual Park Superintendents to designate or restrict open fires within National Parks. From 1983 through January 2002 open fires were permitted at Ocean Beach.

In early 2002, the City and County of San Francisco Commission on the Environment passed resolution 001-02, which recognized, "...there are safety hazards and a large amount of trash and debris that result from bonfires, residual burning logs and nails," and subsequently requested GGNRA to reduce the negative effects the fires were having on the beach by encouraging the park to "...create an effective system that reduces those impacts". In 2004, as a result of this request as well as from information received at several public meetings, GGNRA limited fires to the area between stairwells 15 and 28. Despite the reduction in space where beach fires were allowed, NPS continued to experience a large amount of trash and debris as a result of the fires.

After consideration of various proposed alternatives and recommendations made by several community groups and at public meetings in 2005, GGNRA proposed banning fires on Ocean Beach as the only realistic alternative for reducing hazardous conditions associated with open beach fires. From February 28 - May 31, 2006 the park accepted public comments on this proposal. More than 3,000 individual comments were received, largely in opposition of the ban, although there were also a number of individuals who agreed with the ban and urged NPS to implement it; citing safety, air quality, natural resource and aesthetic concerns.

In 2007 GGNRA decided to institute a one-year Pilot that included the following elements:

- Limiting fires to the area of stairwells 15-20.
- Requiring groups of 25 or more people to obtain a permit.
- Providing fire pits.
- Initiating a fire curfew.
- Hosting regular beach cleanups.
- Collaboration with Burners without Borders and Surfrider Foundation in the creation of artistic fire pits and in post-fire cleanup.

Following conclusion of the one-year pilot program in 2008, NPS continued the program for one additional year. The intent was to evaluate the program in 2009 and make a long term decision for fires on the beach. However, due to staffing shortages the 2009 review did not occur until 2013. Since 2009, the program continued as it had been originally developed in 2007.

Maintenance staff continued to clean the pits and the beach, removing pits that became hazardous or non-functional, and Park Rangers continued to educate visitors engaging in beach fires and to enforce the existing regulations.

Since the 2007 Pilot Program, the park has continued to experience a high volume of law enforcement calls, criminal activity, daily accumulation of abandoned refuse, and environmental damage along the beach. These activities most notably occur in the section between stairwells 15 to 20, in the designated beach fire area.

The most prevalent issues include:

- Inappropriate and toxic materials being burned
- Trash being left on the beach
- Users consuming alcohol and illegal substances
- Glass on the beach
- Dangerous materials such as metal and glass fragments, and nails left scattered in the sand surrounding the fire rings
- Fires not being extinguished properly, leaving hot coals on the beach the morning after
- Disorderly conduct, underage intoxication, and other law enforcement incidents
- Fires being burned outside of designated fire pits
- Fires being burned outside of designated stairwells



Trash leftover from a beach fire

These issues create an unsafe and aesthetically unpleasing site, negatively impact a visitor's experience of the beach, and create hazards for park staff. In addition, NPS must expend a large amount of resources to clean the beach and make it safe for visitors.

Review of the administrative record and past efforts to manage fires on Ocean Beach lead the NPS to develop a proposal for a Revised Pilot Program that is based on the initial 2007 Pilot Program.

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

The purpose of the Revised Pilot Program is to substantially reduce the unsafe conditions caused by fires on Ocean Beach; improve compliance with existing regulations; reduce the burden on NPS staff caused by the large amount of time and resources expended to maintain the beach surrounding the fire rings; decrease law enforcement incidents related to beach fires; reduce negative ecological impacts to the beach; monitor and collect data to document the level of success of the program; educate and inform as many visitors as possible about the beach fire program through various forms of outreach; and ultimately determine if a long term beach fire program is feasible.

The Revised Pilot Program would address the existing impacts described below:

Public Safety

The debris left behind from beach fires poses a great safety hazard to visitors of the beach. The abundant amount of small, sharp objects that are left on the sand (such as splintered wood, rusty nails, glass fragments, etc.) can, and have injured visitors. The harmful chemicals that can be released when certain inappropriate materials are burned can also be a hazard to those who are

present when such materials are being burned. In addition, the individuals who participate in criminal activities on the beach endanger other visitors.

Visitor Experience

The safety hazards described above also contribute to a negative experience for those attempting to enjoy Ocean Beach. The piles of debris and scattered garbage are extremely unsightly, and may even deter some visitors from going to the beach at all. The National Park Service strives to ensure that visitors have a positive experience at the park so that they would like to share their experience with others, and visit GGNRA and Ocean Beach again.

NPS Staff Safety

Many of the fires that occur on Ocean Beach include the burning of inappropriate materials such as wooden pallets, furniture, Christmas trees, glass, toxic materials, etc. Often times these materials do not burn completely and a significant amount of debris is left for NPS Maintenance staff to pick up. This debris poses a safety hazard for the people who must clean it up due to the potential toxins in the material, the large size of some of the items, and the broken glass and nails/spikes left over. It is also common for staff to discover that fires have not been extinguished properly and therefore have to properly remove still-burning embers from the beach.

NPS Law Enforcement Rangers and United States Park Police (USPP) officers are responsible for patrolling the beach regularly and responding to the numerous amounts of calls they receive regarding incidents at Ocean Beach. Most significantly they cite beachgoers for underage drinking, illegal drugs, disorderly conduct, fires outside of a designated fire pit, and groups of 25 or more without a permit.

Park Operations

NPS Maintenance staff must dedicate a large amount of time and resources to cleaning up after the fires at Ocean Beach. Some of this work must be contracted out due to the large quantities of debris that need to be removed, and special equipment is required at times. This equipment has occasionally been damaged due to the types of waste it has encountered, which adds to the clean-up costs. The resources spent on cleaning up after fires are an especially difficult burden given the lack of staff and available funding for ongoing park maintenance.



Gasoline cans and ashes left on the beach

NPS Law Enforcement and USPP officers are frequently strained to enforce laws and regulations on Ocean Beach when fires are happening. They are often called to the area to respond to reports of individuals drinking alcohol, consuming drugs, disturbing nearby residents and other visitors, vandalizing property, and/or burning hazardous materials. They have a large area to protect in GGNRA and must prioritize the calls they receive. These divisions are also strapped due to lack of staff and funding.

Air Quality

When visitors burn inappropriate fuels such as wet wood, plastics, rubber, or treated wood, the open fires on the beach can produce odors that are unpleasant and/or emissions that are unhealthy to other visitors and nearby residents. NPS has received complaints from nearby residents, as well as from the City and County of San Francisco, regarding plumes of dark smoke coming from the beach. The Bay Area Air Quality Management District sent the park a letter in March 2014 requesting GGNRA to prohibit beach fires during Winter Spare the Air season (November 1 – February 28) in order to improve both regional and local air quality. If the Revised Pilot Program is successful and a long term program is approved and implemented GGNRA would consider their request.

PROPOSED OCEAN BEACH FIRE PROGRAM

In order to correct the issues and concerns described in this document the NPS proposes to implement the Revised Pilot Program outlined below.

The program would consist of the following main components:

1. Ten new fire rings installed
2. Revised fire curfew of 9:00 PM
3. Data collection and monitoring program
4. Success indicators
5. Public outreach campaign
6. Evaluation

Each component is explained in more detail below:

1. New fire rings installed

There are currently five fire pits on Ocean Beach; two artistic pits and three NPS supplied pits. These five pits would be removed. The artistic fire pits would be returned to Burners without Borders. The three fire pits installed by NPS would be removed and salvaged.

A total of ten new fire rings are proposed to be installed; they would be made of solid pre-cast concrete, 3.5 ft. wide. They would be placed equidistant from each other between stairwells 15 and 20, and if feasible would be staggered to create more space between them.

2. Revised fire curfew of 9:00 PM

The existing curfew for fires on Ocean Beach is 10:00 PM. NPS is proposing to change this to 9:00 PM for the following reasons:

- Incidents requiring Law Enforcement attention increase later at night
- The adjacent City and County of San Francisco parking lot closes at 10:00 PM; a 9:00 PM curfew would give people time to properly extinguish and clean up their fires before leaving the parking lot by 10:00 PM.

If this change is implemented it would be reflected in the Superintendent's Compendium and new signs would be installed that reflect the new curfew time.

3. Data collection and monitoring program

Throughout the duration of the Revised Pilot Program NPS staff would collect data and monitor the use of the fire pits on the beach. A specific number of days and nights would be selected at for data collection.

- Night time data collection:

NPS staff would tally the number of violations observed in a given night, including, but not limited to: fires outside of pits; alcohol violations; glass violations; fires outside of the rings; and fires occurring past curfew.

- Morning data collection:

NPS staff would collect data in the mornings, documenting the conditions following a night where fires have occurred. This data would include: amount of trash surrounding the fire pits; photos of each pit prior to cleaning; documentation of any hazardous conditions (i.e. hot coals, broken glass, nails).

4. Success indicators

The information collected during the data collection and monitoring period would be evaluated holistically to determine the level of success of the program. Generally, NPS is looking for a noticeable improvement with the elements described below.

- Compliance with beach fire regulations:

- 9:00 PM curfew
- No alcohol
- No glass
- No fires outside of fire rings
- Only appropriate materials being burned
- Crowd sizes over 25 possess a permit

- Cleanup around fire rings; beach fire ring areas (within 20 feet each fire ring) are devoid of the following:

- Hot coals
- Sharp objects (nails, screws, etc.)
- Glass; broken or not
- Large debris (pallets, furniture, trees, etc.)
- Trash piles

5. Public outreach campaign

Informing visitors of the beach fire regulations prior to their arrival is a key element to increasing compliance with the regulations. A campaign would be launched that includes the following:

- A Press Release sent to NPS media contacts
- Social media: Existing Park Facebook and Twitter accounts will be used to notify the public about the Ocean Beach Fire program; posts would include items such as reminders

of beach fire regulations, photos of post-burn conditions; links to the public website for comment submittal, etc.

- Development of an informational flyer to be distributed to local businesses and schools, and made available at various NPS locations in San Francisco and Marin
- Improved signage; larger, more visible
- Updated information on the park website
- Email notification of public review period and implementation of program
- Staff on site at various times throughout the duration of the program to directly engage with visitors, provide information, and answer questions

6. Evaluation of the program

Data collection and monitoring will end on September 1, 2014, at that time NPS staff will begin to evaluate the information that was collected and will review the program in a holistic manner, assessing the overall successes or failures of the program. While this is being reviewed the program will continue unchanged. Once the data collected during the Revised Pilot Program is evaluated, NPS will come to a decision on next steps for the Ocean Beach fire program, which may include continuing the revised pilot program, making further program modifications, or banning fires completely. The NPS will engage the public throughout this process.

NEXT STEPS

The public is invited to submit feedback on NPS's proposed Revised Pilot Program for fires at Ocean Beach. Please provide this feedback by May 16, 2014 online at <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/oceanbeachfires>, or by mail to:

National Park Service
Golden Gate National Recreation Area
Attn: Ocean Beach Fires
Fort Mason, Building 201
San Francisco, CA 94123

NPS will review all the comments received, make any necessary adjustments to the proposed program, and will issue an outline of the final program prior to implementation on May 23, 2014. The impacts of this action are expected to meet the criteria of a Categorical Exclusion (CE) through compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The details of the final program, along with associated impacts, will be described in a CE document that would be uploaded onto the NPS website noted above, and the public will be notified.

Thank you for your participation in this process.