

Mesa Verde and Yucca House Fire Management Plan

Newsletter 1 • January 2022

Mesa Verde National Park
Colorado

National Park Service
US Department of the Interior



Dear Friends,

The National Park Service (NPS) is proposing to develop and implement a Fire Management Plan (FMP) at Mesa Verde National Park (MVNP) and Yucca House National Monument (YHNM) (“the parks”). Fire management activities are currently conducted under a Wildfire Emergency Response Procedure (WERP), which only allows for full fire suppression and limited and localized fuel treatments to maintain defensible space in developed areas and around critical infrastructure. The WERP for the parks will expire in 2022, leaving few options for fire management without development and implementation of the FMP .

The FMP would guide fire program activities and accommodate changes in federal wildland fire policy, guidance, and practices based on ongoing improvements in the science of wildland fire management. The FMP would provide a flexible range of options and activities that could be used to respond to changes in environmental conditions and the specific needs of fire management within the parks. The NPS will analyze impacts of the FMP on resources such as, but not limited to, cultural resources, vegetation, soils, wildlife, water resources, wilderness, and visitor use and experience.

This newsletter includes information about the preliminary concepts being considered and the environment at the parks that could be affected by this proposed project. At this time, we are initiating a 30-day comment period from January 6, 2022 to February 5, 2022.

We invite you to participate in the planning process by submitting ideas for inclusion in the FMP and identifying issues of concern. We hope you will join us in this important discussion regarding the future of your public lands by submitting comments. Thank you for your interest and participation in the development of the FMP.

Sincerely,

Kayci Cook Collins, Superintendent

History

MVNP was established in 1906 to preserve and protect the material culture of the people who occupied the Mesa Verde cuesta. The prehistoric architecture, artifacts and landscapes that the parks are mandated to preserve are primarily associated with Ancestral Pueblo culture that occupied Mesa Verde and the Four Corners region from 500 to 1300 AD. YHNM was established as a national monument in 1919. Nestled between Mesa Verde and Ute Mountain, the monument preserves a large unexcavated pueblo in Montezuma Valley. Since establishment, YHNM has remained largely untouched, offering visitors a sense of discovery and preserving the pueblo's beauty and integrity for future generations.

Pinyon-juniper woodlands, mountain shrubland chaparral communities, and desert-shrub communities cover the area where the parks are located. Historically, fires burned pinyon-juniper woodlands an average of every 400 years, but due to changing climatic conditions fires are recurring in shorter time spans. The frequency in which fires occur has been influenced by a century of “fire suppression,” a management action where fires are prevented from burning on the landscape to stop the degradation of resources. This practice has allowed vegetation communities in the parks to get dense and has caused a buildup of flammable woody material, often referred to as “fuel loading.”

The likelihood of large wildfires in the parks is increasing due to increased fuel loading and prolonged drought conditions, which poses threats to the parks’ infrastructure, cultural and natural resources, and human safety. In MVNP, five large fires in the last 30 years have threatened significant cultural and natural resources and have caused debate over whether the frequency of fires in the parks has been significantly altered by human activities in the last century. Because of the increased threat of large wildfires, NPS has begun to implement strategies to help protect the parks’ resources and human life. In addition to basic suppression, NPS has initiated programs for prescribed fire and hazard fuel reduction. The proposed FMP would also contribute to this strategy.



Cliff Palace, one of the oldest and most visited cultural sites in MVNP

Purpose and Need for Action



Example vegetation that can be seen in MVNP

The purpose of the Fire Management Plan is to provide a long-term strategy to address a range of local wildland fire management activities to be implemented in the parks. The FMP is needed to meet resource management and protection goals and protect park infrastructure while providing for employee and visitor safety. The FMP is also needed to comply with Director’s Order #18: Wildland Fire Management (and associated Reference Manual), which directs parks to implement a range of wildland fire management tools and adapt fire management strategies by incorporating findings of scientific research and innovative measures.

The proposed FMP would ensure the health and safety of the public, NPS staff, and firefighters; protect and maintain the parks’ natural and cultural resources; and provide a quality visitor experience.

Preliminary Proposed Action Ideas

The purpose of the FMP is to incorporate federal wildland fire policy and guidance grounded in the evolving science of wildland fire management into local practices in the parks. The proposed action to write a new FMP would allow the parks to implement a broader range of fire management activities, including wildland fire suppression and expanded fuels management (e.g., prescribed fire/mechanical/manual treatments) within the parks. Proposed activities include:

- Mowing, limbing trees, trimming, and application of other manual and mechanical treatments to reduce vegetation along backcountry roads to prevent ignitions;
- Mowing, limbing trees, and application of other manual and mechanical treatment of vegetation around infrastructure and cultural resources to create buffers, maintain defensible space, protect roads and trails, and reinforce safety zones; and
- Prescribed fire in certain areas to reduce fuel load, reinforce safety zones, and maintain defensible space.

Park Resources that Could be Affected

The table below presents information on some, but not all, of the resources that could be affected by activities proposed under the FMP:

Resource	Description
Visitor Use and Experience	Manual and mechanical treatments and prescribed burns could cause closures of certain areas of the parks as such treatments occur, and evidence treatments (e.g., burn scars) could affect visitor experience.
Cultural Resources	Archeological sites and sensitive resources are present. Sites are both excavated and unexcavated at MVNP, and sites at YHNM are unexcavated.
Wildlife	The parks are home to abundant wildlife. The parks' geographic isolation and location in a geographic transition zone help provide niches for this wide variety of animal species.
Vegetation	Native vegetation, including old growth pinyon-juniper woodlands, small stands of Douglas Fir and Ponderosa Pine, and recently burned grassland, are present.
Soil and Water Resources	Cryptobiotic soils and water resources such as ephemeral drainages, seeps, springs, and the Mancos river are present and could be vulnerable to impacts resulting from runoff, erosion, and compaction.
Air Quality	The parks would adhere to state air quality permit conditions to minimize effects of prescribed burns like smoke on air quality.
Special-Status Species	Chapin Mesa milkvetch, a candidate species under the Endangered Species Act, and nine other rare plant species occur and could be impacted by fuels treatments. Mexican Spotted Owls have not been identified in MVNP, but suitable habitat is present.



Fire lookout at Park Point



Scene from Bircher Fire, 2000

Timeframe and How to Comment

Following the close of the comment period, NPS will develop a set of alternatives for analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). NPS anticipates a NEPA document to be available to the public by Spring of 2022. Additional public engagement will occur at that time.

Public participation is an important element of the planning process, and we welcome your ideas, concerns, issues, suggestions, and potential topics for consideration. Please share your comments no later than **Saturday, February 5, 2022** online through the Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) website at:

<http://parkplanning.nps.gov/MEVE>

Before individuals include their address, phone number, email address, or other personal identifying information in their comment, they should be aware that their entire comment, including their personal identifying information, may be made publicly available at any time. Individuals may request that the NPS withhold their name and/or address from public disclosure. If individuals wish to do this, they must state this prominently at the beginning of their comment and make such a request by checking the box "keep my contact information private." on the website. The NPS will honor such requests to the extent allowable by law, but individuals should be aware that NPS may still be required to disclose personal identifying information.

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