

Air quality and a future with Yosemite wildfires

By Gina Clugston

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Wildfires may be vital for the ecology of Yosemite National Park, but that doesn't dispel concerns about their effect on air quality – both for residents and for visitors who come to see iconic vistas.

"It's a very, very difficult issue," says Chief Martin. "If you can imagine 100 years ago, smoke would have been ubiquitous in July and August and into September, but there wouldn't have been as much. Because we've continued to suppress this natural event for years and years, we're now caught in a really difficult dilemma wherein smoke is produced from the very large logs and trees, and the dense duff and litter on the forest floor. Somehow that has to be removed, and the only way to remove it is through fire."

Martin says there are a lot of "high pressure" days, when it's very difficult for the smoke to get into the higher atmosphere where it can be transported away.

"We do understand that smoke and air quality is a huge issue, and we work very closely with the California Air Resources Board and our local air pollution control districts to time those prescribed fire opportunities where there is dispersion, and smoke is transported away from sensitive areas.

"It's not perfect; we know we'll have really smoky days and we try to balance that, but in large wildfires, smoke is an inevitability."

A future with fires

As to what the vision is for the next 25 years and the role of fire in Yosemite, Martin says it's a long game with several moving parts, and everyone needs to start thinking about fire in terms of a mitigation, rather than just suppression.

"It's all hands on deck when we have wildfires going on in the summer," she says. "But for the rest of the year, there's a tremendous opportunity for us as fire managers and the public to think about what community protection and living with fire means. Prescribed fire is a good tool, so how much smoke can we live with in the off-season? What are we willing to spend on thinning and mechanical treatments? Those are all really big questions we need to wrestle with going forward.

"Our population is increasing and moving into fire's environment, and we have to accept a certain amount of responsibility. It will be a combination of using all our tools in the fall, winter and spring. I think the taxpayers and communities will see greatly enhanced benefits if we think about a mitigation industry rather than a suppression industry. That mitigation could occur three-quarters of the year, rather than trying to squeeze it all in during the summer."

It's a very big, complicated tapestry, says Martin, with no one good answer, but she is looking forward to continuing the outreach to the public about the benefits and effective ways to manage fire.

"We don't just want to tell the devastation story, but also the renewal story and the adaptation story of how we can better live with and accept fire."

Both Shive and Martin are very excited to get into the burn areas in the spring to see the new life and learn more about the rejuvenating effects of fire, and how critical it is to the health of Yosemite's forests. Both want to dispel the notion that fire destroys the forest, and bring awareness to the important role it plays.

"Next year you are going to see things growing," says Shive.