



# NPS Fire and Aviation Management

## *Supporting the National Park Service Mission*

*In the National Park Service, Fire and Aviation Management is dedicated to leadership, collaboration, and mitigating risk to help ensure the safety of our employees and the public we serve. Its proactive programs go beyond emergency response.*



Helirappellers are sometimes used in search and rescue, reaching a person in need of assistance by rappelling from a helicopter to the ground.



Planes or helicopters may be used to transport staff to remote areas.



Helicopters are often used in firefighting to cool down a fire with large buckets of water.



UAS is a newer aviation tool in the NPS toolbox. USFS / K GREER

### Fire and Aviation Management

NPS Fire and Aviation Management (FAM) facilitates Aviation, Structural Fire, and Wildland Fire Management. The programs manage unique activities that are critical to the overall mission of the National Park Service. A leader in communication, science, use of technology, and interagency collaboration, the division contributes to cultural and natural resource preservation, public education and awareness, and virtually every aspect of NPS. Multidisciplinary FAM activities take place at nearly every park in the National Park Service and are carried out by NPS employees at every level.

### Aviation

In the 1930s, Cape Hatteras National Seashore operated the first aircraft owned by the Department of the Interior through the National Park Service. Dave Driskill, the first pilot that the NPS employed, provided transportation for personnel and supplies to the remote park areas up and down the Outer Banks of North Carolina.

Immediately after World War II, agencies began using aircraft for firefighting efforts. Shortly thereafter, Glacier National Park and Yellowstone National Park employed the first smokejumpers in the National Park Service.

Today the National Park Service uses aviation resources to support a wide variety of park programs. Aviation resources are used for search and rescue, law enforcement and visitor protection, natural resource management, wildlife management, wildland and prescribed fire management, facility management and personnel transportation.

Aircraft from fleet and private vendors flew approximately 11,000 hours during 7,400 flights in Fiscal Year 2019 in support of NPS programs. Between single engine airplanes, helicopters, and unmanned aircraft, the National Park Service maintains 40 aircraft.

### Structural Fire

The National Park Service is the nation's steward for thousands of structures and over 80 million artifacts. As one of the federal government's largest landlords, structures within national parks include hotels, motels, cabins, visitor centers, interpretive centers, and historical buildings, such as Independence Hall and many former presidents' homes. Many of the structures are historic as well as national icons, such as the Statue of Liberty.



Structural fire training at Yellowstone National Park.



Structural firefighters. NPS/R CATON

The National Park Service enabling legislation, as well as other statutes, ensures that the buildings and artifacts entrusted to it are protected and that the people who visit or work in them are safe from undue hazards or risks. The Structural Fire Program assists the Service in its mission to preserve and protect human life and the resources entrusted to its management.

The National Park Service maintains a structural fire capability that meets the diversity and complexity of the different units of the Service. The structural fire program provides servicewide policy, standards, operational procedures and accountability. It addresses development of new bureau policies for structural fire safety responsibilities, minimum fire safety requirements, and ensures park managers are aware of them.



Prescribed fire in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. NPS/W BIELENBERG

The program emphasizes prevention and education rather than reaction and response, and maintains a process for conducting structural fire inspections at each National Park Service unit. The program strives to ensure that all units within the Service have an appropriate level of structural fire protection provided in a safe and cost effective manner by qualified personnel.

#### Wildland Fire

The history of fire management in national parks dates back to the 19th Century. In 1886, the U.S. Army arrived in Yellowstone, the world's first national park, to protect the park from hunting, trapping, grazing, logging, and fire. The soldiers were this nation's first paid wildland firefighters. Formal wildland fire management at a national level began in the National Park Service in 1926, 10 years after the establishment of the bureau.

Though some scientists and superintendents advocated for light burning, or as it's now known, prescribed fire, the young fire management program focused on fire suppression. By the 1950s, Sequoia National Park, Everglades National Park, and Pipestone National Monument were using prescribed fire. The evolution of fire management continued through the late 1960s. In the 1970s, some parks began using fires started by lightning, or more rarely lava or volcanic ash, as a resource management tool.

Science has advanced our views of ecosystem management. Today, parks are not viewed as isolated islands, but part of a larger ecosystem. Using fire management plans to guide them, park and fire managers partner with managers in other agencies and across boundaries to make decisions and manage fire on a landscape scale.



Early prescribed fire at Everglades National Park.

In addition to prescribed fire and wildfire, the National Park Service uses mechanical treatments to treat excess fuels and reduce the risk of wildfire. This active management of public lands aims to reduce risk to firefighters and public safety.

Much has changed over time, however, throughout the years, risk management toward firefighter and public safety has remained a key aspect of fire management and its top priority. At no time will this objective be compromised.

Source of historical information: Rothman, Hal K. (2005). A Test of Adversity and Strength: Wildland Fire in the National Park System.

The document is available through our [History page](#).



Wildland fire engine in Florida.



Protecting a prehistoric cliff dwelling from wildfire in Arizona.