

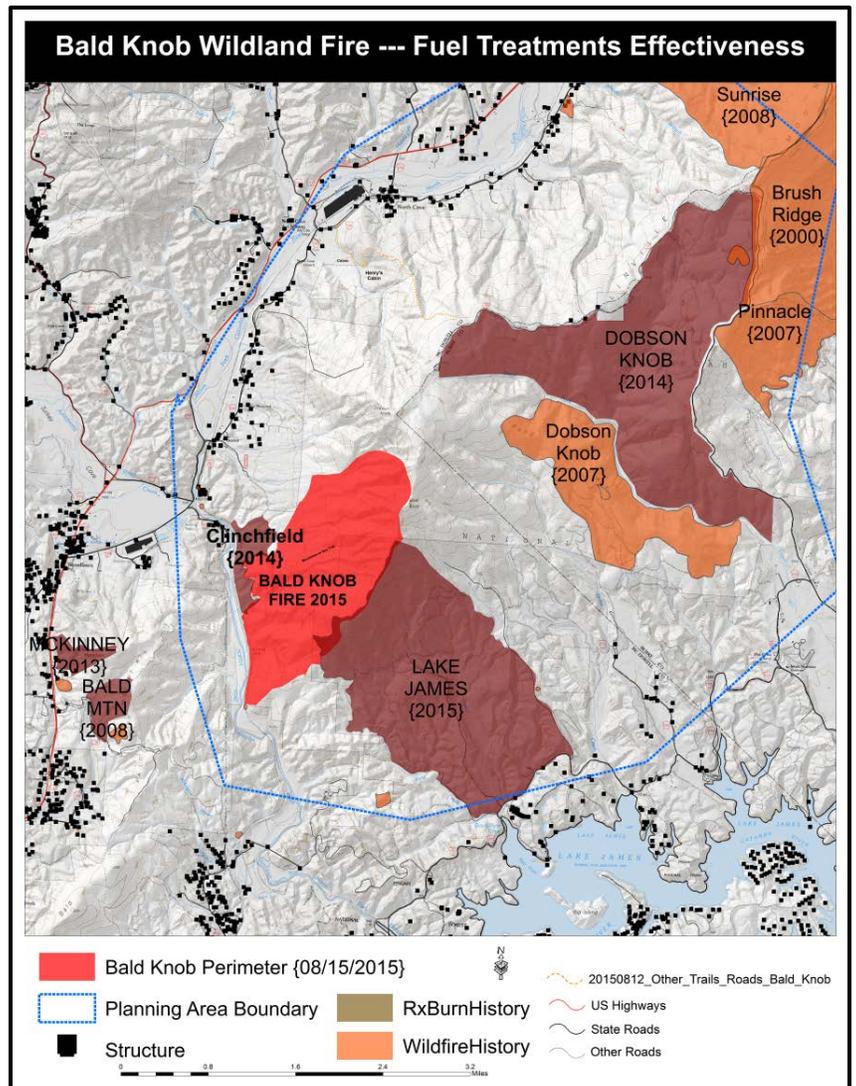
Bald Knob Wildfire – Pisgah National Forest, NC

Collaboration is Key – Fuel Treatments that Allowed Fire Management Objectives to Include Restoring Fire Adapted Ecosystems

Introduction

A lightning strike started the Bald Knob fire on July 14th about 30 miles east Asheville, North Carolina on the Grandfather Ranger District of the Pisgah National Forest, part of the National Forests in North Carolina. The ignition point was situated in rugged, back country terrain, limiting firefighter access. Fortunately, the surrounding area received fuel treatments and had seen past wildfires which afforded managers the opportunity to manage the fire to meet resource objectives while minimizing risk and exposure of firefighters. The strategic placement of the fuel treatments along with the past wildfires allowed for the appropriate response to this wildfire to be one that focused on restoring fire adapted ecosystems and reducing fuels while providing for fire fighter safety and community protection. Collaboration with adjacent landowners and partners through the Collaborative Forests Landscape Restoration Program was as critical in the planning and implementation of the fuel treatments as it was to the successful management of the Bald Knob fire.

“We realized from start that this ignition was in a very difficult place to access and that we couldn’t reasonably ask fire fighters to engage in such rugged terrain. Likewise, considering the heavy fuels and inability to use equipment in this type of terrain we knew suppression tactics would have a low probability of success. Pair all that with the fact that we have restoration treatments and a wildfire history all over this ridge and it really was a great opportunity to step back and think about the appropriate response. With these recent fires we are starting to reap the value of the restoration work under our CFLR.” Nicholas Larson, District Ranger, Grandfather Ranger District

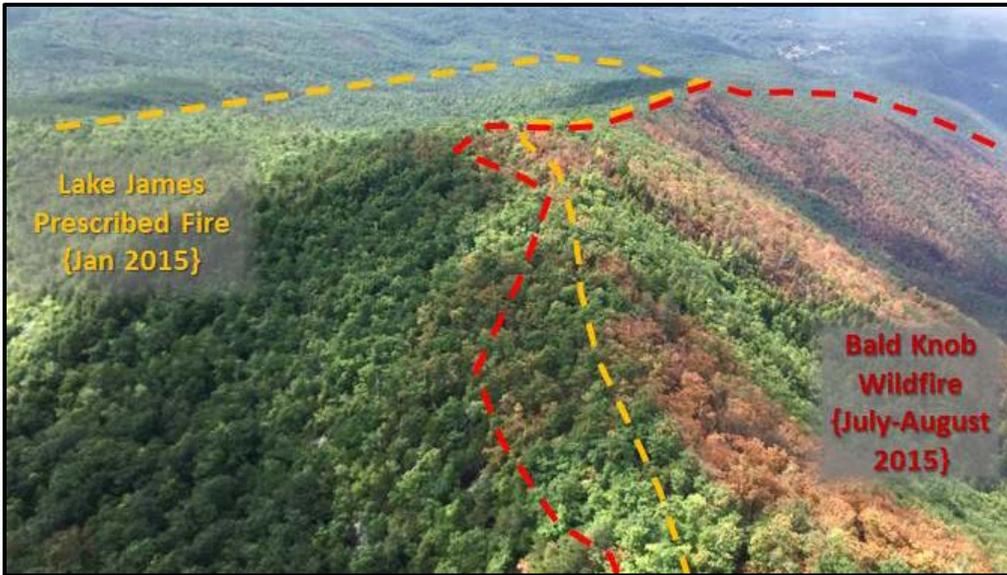


Appropriate Management Response to the Wildfire

On initial detection, it was obvious the fire was located in rough terrain and difficult to access. Direct attack on this wildfire would have posed an increased risk for firefighters and had minimal probability of success. The Fire Management Officer and the District Ranger wanted to choose better ground to fight the fire. This year, summer drought conditions provided an opportunity to utilize wildfire to reduce the fuels and allow fire to play its role in a fire adapted ecosystem. Under typical summer conditions lightning strike fires have little opportunity for growth and do

not burn more than a few days before rainfall puts them out. However, current fuel conditions and weather forecasts indicated this fire could last for numerous weeks.

The recent prescribed fire fuel treatments and past wildfires in the immediate area around the wildfire were on the forefront of the Fire Management Officer and District Ranger’s decision. Areas to the northeast, southeast and west were recently treated with prescribed fires. Also areas to the north had older wildfire “footprints.” The fire was surrounded on three sides by either a strategic reduction in fuels in the form of prescribed burning or a change in condition and reduction in fuels as a result of past wildfire history. These past fires may not have completely halted the spread of the Bald Knob fire but would have reduced the fire behavior, allowing firefighters opportunities to safely contain the wildfire. The combination of prescribed burns and old wildfires created a nice buffer on three sides of the fire.



The District Ranger decided to manage this wildfire with a confine/contain strategy to provide for community protection where values at risk were high and provide for resource benefit where values at risk were low. This approach provided ample decision space to use appropriate strategies in protecting residential areas and private values, while falling back to existing fire-lines and natural barriers as the fire moved through fire adapted ecosystems

on National Forest Lands. The fire history in area provided plenty of time for firefighters to prioritize work near private lands and improve old roads and natural barriers to the south and east as needed. This also afforded the time to engage the affected communities in the objectives of the fire as well as keep them informed on smoke impacts and the fire’s progress. Prior to the wildfire, the collaborative efforts of the Forest Service and partners set the stage for communicating with adjacent landowners and communities about the resource benefits this wildfire would provide while providing for public and firefighter safety.

Collaborative Forests Landscape Restoration Program

The fuel treatments around the Bald Knob wildfire are part of Grandfather Restoration Project, one of twenty-three projects under the National Collaborative Forests Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP). This project is focused around restoring fire resilient ecosystems while providing for community protection. It was



Lake James Prescribed Fire Fuel Treatment -- January 2015

developed through a collaborative process engaging a wide range of partners. Along with restoring fire adapted vegetation, the Project seeks to improve wildlife habitat and forest composition in degraded stands, treat Eastern and Carolina hemlocks for the destructive Hemlock Woolly Adelgid, target sensitive areas including the Linville Gorge Wilderness and Wilson Creek Wild and Scenic River for non-native invasive plant control, and restore watershed health to benefit native trout and improve water quality.

“In a few decades, the Grandfather District can once again be a place where fire is playing its natural role, helping promote forest health...” Josh Kelly, a Public Lands Field Biologist with Mountain True (a grassroots environmental group), describing the Grandfather Restoration Project earlier this year.



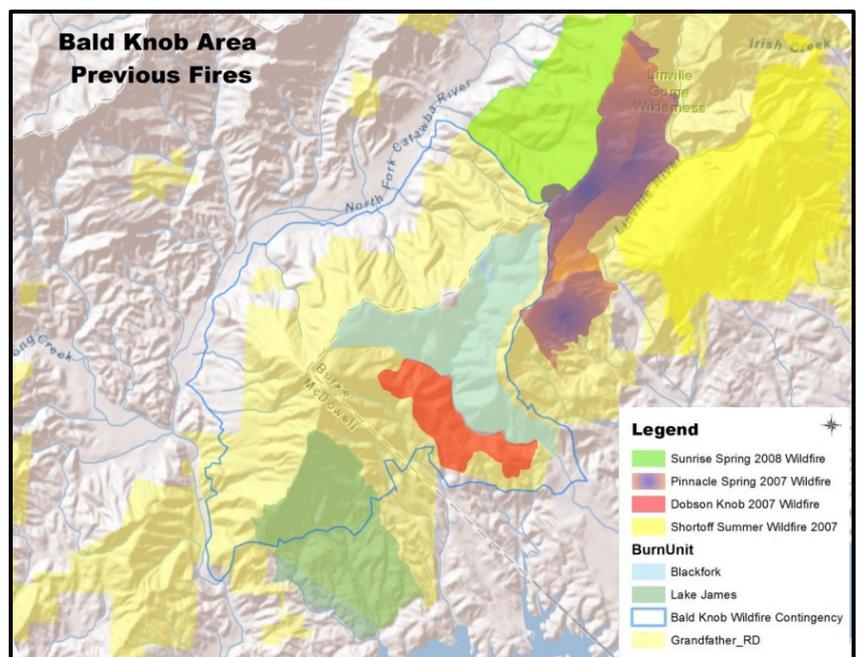
Lake James Prescribed Fire Fuel Treatment -- January 2015

The Grandfather Restoration Project identified the Bald Mountain and Dobson Knob (northern most point of the fire) area as high priority for treatment based on the fire adapted ecology and departure from historic fire conditions. This prioritized three of the treatment areas surrounding the Bald Knob fire. The James Lake prescribed burn was completed earlier in this year and stopped the Bald Knob fire on the southeastern edge, creating a barrier to nearby communities and private land. The Clinchfield treatment, completed last year, provided protection to several nearby residents west of the wildfire by allowing firefighters to utilize existing fuels breaks to contain the wildfire. Likewise, the Dobson Knob treatment, completed last year, would have provided control opportunities for fire fighters had the wildfire grown that large towards the northeast. All of these treatments were critical in containing the fire and were used in the decision for managing the fire for resource benefit.

Past Wildfires

Wildfire is not new to the Bald Mountain Area. Recent wildfires burned in the Dobson Knob area, Shortoff Mountain, and the Pinnacle in the spring and summer of 2007. In 2008 the Sunrise wildfire burned just west of Linville Gorge Wilderness. 2013 brought the Table Rock fire and the Blue Gravel fire was in 2015.

These recent wildfires and prescribed burns have informed the USFS about the presence of more rare, fire adapted plant species and fire adapted vegetation. As we consider the pace and scale of restoration across the landscape, targeting existing remnant



Fire History of the Bald Knob Area (Clinchfield fuel treatment not shown. Blackfork burn unit was part of the Dobson Knob fuel treatment)

populations of fire adapted species for restoration and known high fire return intervals can aid the fuels conditions and widen the decision space when managing an unplanned wildfire. The Grandfather Restoration Project treatments along with historic fire footprints are now aiding managers' decisions as is evident from the shift in wildfire management objectives and strategies of the Bald Knob, Wolf Creek (2015), Blue Gravel (2015) and Brown Mountain fires (2014).

Achieving National Cohesive Strategy Goals

The Grandfather Restoration Project fuel treatments were key in deciding that the **appropriate fire management response** to the Bald Knob wildfire was to manage the wildfire for resource benefits while providing for fire fighter and public safety. These treatments along with the management strategy for this wildfire moved the vegetation closer towards the desired condition of **fire resilient landscapes**. Through the collaborative process, the Grandfather Restoration Project is reducing risk and helping to create **fire adapted communities**. The Grandfather Restoration Project along with management of the Bald Knob Fire clearly demonstrates success in meeting the three goals of the Cohesive Strategy (resilient landscapes, fire adapted communities, and safe and effective wildfire response).



Fire Backing through Leaf Litter on the Western Flank along Mountain-to-Sea-Trail at 1600 -- Bald Knob Wildfire

Contact for More Information:

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Restoring Fire Adapted Ecosystems

Grass understory returns following the Shortoff wildfire in 2007 and the Blue Gravel wildfire in April 2015.

About 8 miles northeast of the Bald Knob Wildfire