

**The 2012 Creek Fire - An Escaped Cal Fire Prescribed Burn
Montana de Oro State Park, San Luis Obispo County, California**

An analysis by the California Chaparral Institute
June 12, 2013

Montana de Oro State Park is a beautiful example of a coastal shrubland ecosystem, much of it covered by northern coastal sage scrub. Cal Fire, however, views this habitat primarily as fuel that needs to be managed. Thus a burn plan has been implemented to reduce the “fuel.”

Cal Fire's official justification for the prescribed burn it conducted on November 12, 2012, included the following:

The burn is being conducted as part of Cal Fire's vegetation management program and is intended to reduce hazardous vegetation and wildland fuels as well as provide defensible space to PG&E infrastructure in an area considered to be at high risk for large and damaging wildfires, according to the agency.

- San Luis Obispo Tribune

The burn site is a long way from any PG&E facilities, but it could be seen as a logical extension of Cal Fire's ongoing burn plan for the area.

Cal Fire's own fire history database shows that this coastal area has a low incidence of fires, and has not had a large one since records have been kept. The extremely moist marine climate and geographic isolation contribute to this. But a lot of small to medium-sized fires have started on PG&E land. The biggest on record is close to 1,800 acres in the fall of 1982, which started right at the power plant. No causes are indicated in the database, but they are probably accidental since these ignitions are clustered near some of PG&E's infrastructure.

Cal Fire has conducted several burns since 2009. The ones in 2012 were several hundred acres each.

The November 12, 430 acre prescribed burn was on a combination of State Park and PG&E property in the watershed where their property boundary lies. The intent was to hold the fire at Coon Creek Trail on the northwest flank. Unfortunately, the fire escaped the next day and sloped-over the intended boundary and burned an additional 103 acres.

After the fire jumped containment lines and burned onto state park land, Cal Fire Information Officer (FIO) Es Berliner had this to say:

“Prescribed burns are very valuable for land management. If there is a wildfire, prescribed burns create a line of containment to stop the fire from coming into town.”

This would make sense if the site of the burn were near town. San Luis Obispo is more than ten miles away. Or if winds that could drive big fire weather would blow towards town instead of out to sea. Or if firefighters were land managers. But Cal Fire's fire history database shows nine fires on PG&E's land and only one on the state park. So theoretically this treatment could help

keep fires starting on PG&E land off the state park land. If so, then Cal Fire burned up a significant amount of the state park while implementing their plan to protect the park from fire.

As hundreds of additional firefighters poured to catch the 103-acre slop-over, the FIO contributed to another news cycle:

Berliner described the incident as “freakish.” She said officials plan carefully for all contingencies and they simply did not anticipate the ferocity of the winds. “Mother Nature — you can’t control it,”

Although there is not a [Climate Center weather station](#) at Montana de Oro, the nearby stations (Las Tablas, Arroyo Grande, and Vandenberg) do not show any “freakish” ferocity in the wind on the day the fire got out of control (11/13/12). Unexpected wild weather does occur sometimes of course, but Cal Fire has a lot of experience watching and anticipating the weather.

Did the prescribed burn get out of control because part of the established “prescription” was not followed? Several fire managers/scientists we have talked with were surprised the escape happened considering the excellent weather forecasting personal available at the time. They did, however, cite situations where rules were bent in the past to conform with staffing restrictions and desires. Once a project is lined up, staff is on the ground, and engines are ready, there is significant pressure to go ahead with a burn despite the fact that the “prescription” is not exactly as described on paper. Changing staff and continuing to pay for folks on the ground can be inconvenient as well as expensive. Trying to get the logistics, the weather, and the “fuel” conditions all in line before everything changes is easier said than done.

Analyzing the fire scar on Google Earth and comparing the reported fire perimeter and the apparent tactics suggested by placement of those lines, it appears there were another five slop-overs of various sizes scattered all around the perimeter of the fire. The largest one at the south end of the burn area is almost as big as the slop-over on state park land at the north end. Cal Fire appears to have had repeated and ongoing problems with slop-overs. But they apparently continued to burn even though they were having a whole series of small to medium-sized containment problems before the big one on the state park land that could not be ignored. This is speculation on our part, but it's hard to deny the reality of the events, based on the satellite photo and fire perimeter evidence.

One of the biggest impacts from the escaped fire at Montana de Oro (other than the reportedly extra half million spent on suppression) may be that while Cal Fire planned to hold the fire at a trail, the agency ended up having to cut 1.6 miles of hand-lines through fairly pristine coastal sage scrub to contain the slop-over in addition to heavily impacting the Coon Creek Trail. The associated soil disturbance will make the area vulnerable to the invasion of non-native weeds, and hence increase the chance of future ignitions due to the flashy fuels (weeds).

So in the end we have a compromised ecosystem that is one of the key features of a state park caused by a questionable “fuel” treatment that did not appear necessary to protect lives and property.

OFFICIAL CAL FIRE INFORMATION ON THE INCIDENT

Creek Fire

Creek Fire Incident Information:

Last Updated:	November 15, 2012 8:15 am	FINAL
Date/Time Started:	November 13, 2012 2:15 am	
Administrative Unit:	CAL FIRE San Luis Obispo Unit	
County:	San Luis Obispo County	
Location:	North side of Coon Creek in the Montana de Oro State Park	
Acres Burned - Containment:	100 acres	
Estimated Containment	100 acres - 100% contained	
Structures Threatened:	There is no current threat to infrastructure	
Cooperating Agencies:	California State Parks, US Forest Service	
Total Fire Personnel:	145 personnel	
Total Fire Engines:	9 engines	
Total Fire crews:	6 crews	
Total Water Tenders:	1 water tender	
Conditions:	While conducting a vegetation management project burn in the Montana de Oro State Park, stronger than expected off-shore winds fanned the prescribed fire onto the north side of Coon Creek. The 430 acre prescribed fire was being conducted to improve wildlife habitat health, improve range for cattle and to reduce the impacts of a wildland fire by burning old overgrown vegetation. Prescribed Fire is an important part of land management.	

Fire near Montaña de Oro is 100 percent contained, Cal Fire says

Published: November 12, 2012

Read more here: <http://www.sanluisobispo.com/2012/11/12/2293224/fire-montana-de-oro-smoke.html##storylink=cpy>

The prescribed burn is being conducted on 430 acres on remote and hilly land north of Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant

By Tribune staff — newsroom@thetribunenews.com

UPDATE: 5:25 a.m. Thursday: The Creek Fire at Montaña de Oro State Park is now 100 percent contained, according to a news release from Cal Fire.

Firefighters will remain in the area patrolling and mopping up.

UPDATE: 4:10 p.m. Wednesday: The Creek Fire at Montaña de Oro State Park is now 75 percent contained, according to a news release from Cal Fire. One firefighter suffered a minor injury.

UPDATE: 5:30 a.m. Wednesday: Fire officials say they now have 60 percent containment of a 100-acre fire near Montana de Oro that occurred after a prescribed burn jumped a containment line.

Firefighters worked through the night to contain the Creek Fire, according to a news release from Cal Fire. Offshore winds were strong, but firefighters were able to prevent the fire from spreading further.

Full containment is expected Thursday.

“It was a cold wind out there last night but the firefighters kept working on the steep slopes to put this fire out,” Cal Fire Chief Robert Lewin was quoted in the news release as saying.

UPDATE 3:25 p.m. Tuesday: Fire crews are still aggressively fighting a 100-acre fire that occurred after a prescribed burn jumped a containment line this morning, costing an approximate \$500,000.

The fire outside the original containment area is now 30 percent contained, according to a Cal Fire news release. Rob Lewin, County/Cal Fire chief, said he was optimistic that crews would be able to stop the fire from spreading any further by tonight. The high winds that led to the fire jumping the containment line have now diminished but could come back, Lewin said.

There are 450 fire personnel on scene fighting the fire. Only 150 fire personnel were planned to be onsite for the 430-acre prescribed burn.

The fire is not threatening any structures, campgrounds or protected natural resources.

The prescribed fire is on track and all fire lines are secured, said Lewin.

UPDATE 12:09 p.m. Tuesday: A planned fire that grew out of control near Montana de Oro is 15 percent contained and should be completely subdued by Friday, according to a Cal Fire spokeswoman.

Es Berliner, speaking for Cal Fire, added that there is no damage to structures and no threat to people.

The prescribed burn jumped a containment line early this morning and ignited 100 additional acres. Of that, 15 percent is under control, and the rest on its way to being contained, Berliner said shortly before noon.

She said 325 firefighters from various agencies are fighting the blaze.

Berliner called the incident “freakish.” She said officials plan carefully for all contingencies and they simply did not anticipate the ferocity of the winds. “Mother Nature — you can’t control it,” she said.

UPDATE 10:18 a.m. Tuesday: A prescribed burn in the Coon Creek area of Montaña de Oro State Park jumped a containment line early this morning and has burned 45 acres of additional land.

The escape occurred in the northern Coon Creek area at about 3:50 a.m. due to high winds. The agency has contingency plans for such incidents, and the fire is expected to be brought back into containment later today, said Es Berliner, Cal Fire spokeswoman.

The burn is being conducted on 430 acres over two days on remote and hilly land owned by State Parks land and Pacific Gas and Electric Co. north of Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant. The burn has created a large plume of smoke that is visible from much of San Luis Obispo County.

“Prescribed burns are very valuable for land management,” Berliner said. “If there is a wildfire, prescribed burns create a line of containment to stop the fire from coming into town.”

UPDATE 3:31 p.m. Cal Fire officials have called out additional units to help with a prescribed burn this afternoon in and around Montaña de Oro state park.

There are currently 13 engines on scene, plus a water tender, two bulldozers, three hand crews and a fixed-wing aircraft, said Cal Fire Communications Operator Patricia Grisham.

The burn was about 50 percent complete and within containment lines about 2:45 p.m., according to [a tweet](#) the agency posted on its Twitter account.

The additional units were called out to help when the wind picked up this afternoon.

Grisham said she expects the burn to continue into Tuesday. She said Cal Fire has received calls from numerous local residents about the smoke.

UPDATE 10:42 a.m. Cal Fire has started a 430-acre prescribed burn in Montaña de Oro. The burn will take place in the state park as well as on PG&E property.

The agency posted two photos about 10:30 a.m. of the burn on its Twitter page at https://twitter.com/CALFIRE_SLO.

Original story: Cal Fire will conduct a 430-acre prescribed burn today or Tuesday in conjunction with PG&E and the state parks and recreation department.

The burn is located on PG&E property and in Montaña de Oro state park in the Coon Creek area, according to a Cal Fire news release. The final burn date will be dependent in part on the weather.

Some private and public trails near the burn will be closed as well as Pecho Valley Road south of Spooners Cove.

Six fire engines, one bulldozer, three fire crews and one helicopter will be assigned to the burn.

The burn is being conducted as part of Cal Fire's vegetation management program and is intended to reduce hazardous vegetation and wildland fuels as well as provide defensible space to PG&E infrastructure in an area considered to be at high risk for large and damaging wildfires, according to the agency.

Residents in the Morro Bay and Five Cities area and those traveling near the coast may see smoke from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. on the day of the burn.

County officials urge people to take precautions and use common sense to reduce harmful health effects by limiting outdoor activities.

The prescribed burn is being coordinated with the San Luis Obispo County Air Pollution Control District and the California Air Resources Board in order to minimize the smoke impacts on surrounding communities.

The project is dependent on weather and will be carried out during favorable conditions that provide adequate consumption and smoke dispersal. If the conditions are not favorable, the burn will be rescheduled.