

## Summary of prescribed fires in Prince Albert National Park 2015

Prince Albert National Park conducted four controlled fires in spring 2015, plus an additional fire in October.

### Fuel Management for Hazard Reduction:

**1. Waskesiu Community Fuel Break Prescribed Fire** - The goal of this fire was to reduce the amount of fuel hazard for the protection of public safety and infrastructure in the event that a wildfire threatens the community of Waskesiu. The fuel break, burned on April 16, is an area of thinned and cleared forest that surrounds Waskesiu. A portion is burned off annually, if and when the right conditions are present. The area quickly grows back green with new grass that would potentially slow or stop a fire from entering town, and give Parks Canada wildland firefighters time to initiate fire suppression tactics. This year, Waskesiu Fire Department firefighters cross-trained with Parks Canada to learn more about fighting fire in the wildland interface.



Parks Canada wildland firefighter alongside Waskesiu firefighter in community fuel break.

### Restoration Prescribed Fires:

Canada is a global leader in national park management and ecological restoration. Parks Canada's conservation and restoration program is the most diverse and progressive program in the agency's history for undertaking key restoration actions – like prescribed fire - that contribute to the ecological health of national parks and the recovery of species at risk.



Skeletal remains of a Model T rest near Rabbit Cabin on the West Side of Prince Albert National Park. A plains bison bull with cow birds on his back forages a sedge meadow on the park's West Side.

Prince Albert National Park protects rare native grasslands found predominantly on the south and west sides of the park. For much of the 19th and 20th centuries, society viewed fire as a destructive element and worked to extinguish wildfires in all cases. By excluding fire in this area, meadows are now being encroached upon by aspen forest. Returning fire to the landscape in a safe and controlled way helps create a healthy mosaic of meadows woven into surrounding forest.

**2. Paskwaw Mostos Prescribed Fire (120 ha)** - Located on the park's West Side near Amyot Lake, a series of wet sedge meadows and dry upland meadows are intricately connected and used by a variety of wildlife species. The Sturgeon River plains bison herd moves in and around the area where dung piles dot and fertilize the grass and wallows are visible everywhere one looks. Wolves prey on moose, deer, elk and bison

by hunting them in the meadows and hundreds of migrating bird species use the habitat in spring and summer. By burning the meadows in a controlled fashion, older thatch and dried grass are removed allowing fresh grass to grow and grazing opportunities are improved. This new crop of grass will hopefully encourage the bison herd to remain in the park for longer periods where they forage for food. Native grasslands are slowly reclaiming their place among the trees. The meadows were control burned on April 29.



A wallow (left) and scat (right foreground) are evidence of bison recently using this meadow.

**3. Wasstrom's Flats Prescribed Fire (1,000 ha)** – This collection of meadows represents one of the core area of plains rough fescue grassland in Prince Albert National Park. It can be found along the southwestern boundary of the park. Wasstrom's Flats has been burned three times since 2011, with the purpose to restore native grasslands. Conditions were unique this year in that there was very little spring precipitation and the available ground fuels (grass, logs, hazel etc.) were extremely dry. The controlled fire held the week of May 12 burned hot and fast but did not dig into the roots of vegetation. Heaps of white ash told the story of the fire's intensity while, scratching at the earth only a few centimetres deep revealed new growth ready to break through the soil's surface and turn the meadows green once again.



A helicopter with Parks Canada fire personnel surveys the fire's progress in Wasstrom's Flats May 12.



A walk through the fire site on May 13 shows how intense the fire burned and the new life released by its heat just below the surface of the ash.

**4. Sugar Creek Prescribed Fire (1,000 ha)** – Rabbit Creek and the West Side Trail divide Wasstrom’s Flats and Sugar Creek fire units. Sugar Creek is also situated along the park’s southern boundary and West Side Trail but consists of heavier forest cover and wetter conditions in the fescue meadows. It tends not to burn as hot as the open meadows of Wasstrom’s Flats, but the grasses found in the understory of the forest stands is equally dependent on fire for renewal. Sugar Creek was burned on May 12.



Parks Canada firefighters are professionals trained to reintroduce fire on the landscape.

#### **Autumn Prescribed Fire and 2016 Restoration Plans:**

##### **5. South End Meadows Prescribed Fire (900 ha) – Paspwin south fire guard (25 ha)**

The South End Meadows prescribed fire unit is scheduled to be burned in spring 2016 should favourable and safe conditions present themselves. This area of fescue meadows and aged jack pine tree stands is located in the southeast corner of Prince Albert National Park and is roughly 900 ha in size.

A considerable amount of preparatory work has already been done to ensure the safety and success of the controlled fire. Jack pine tree stands around the park's South Gate kiosk, a federally protected heritage building, were thinned during the winter of 2014-15 while guard lines were created along the south and southeast park boundary. An old gravel pit was reclaimed by spraying non-native vegetation, reshaping and contouring the landscape to a more natural state. Monitoring with the assistance of students from three post-secondary institutions will continue next year.

On October 19, 2015, controlled fire was used to create a fire guard by burning the meadows and boundary line around Paspivin Cultural Heritage Site; an area also known for previously hosting a bison paddock. Further work will be completed in winter 2015-16 to clear vegetation from around power lines.

Open houses will be held for the public in late winter or early spring to share more information about this upcoming fire that will help restore rare grasslands and rejuvenate pine trees that require heat from fire for the cones to release their seeds.



**Pine cones require heat from fire to open the hardened shells so seeds can be released to regenerate the forest.**

## **Conclusion:**

Through its fire management program, Parks Canada is committed to ensuring public safety by reducing the risks of wildfires, and restoring ecosystems.

A full spectrum of fuel management practices can be used to lessen the chance of intense, prolonged wildfires threatening communities such as Waskesiu, while also restoring rare, native grasslands. Through a rotational use of controlled fire in different areas of the park, fire personnel will, over time, restore the mosaic pattern of meadows and forests that make Prince Albert National Park unique.



The mosaic of meadows, wetlands and forest are maintained through the use of prescribed fire.

For more information on Parks Canada's fire management program, visit

<http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/progs/np-pn/eco/eco5.aspx>