

Firefighting in Wilderness Areas

The Dome Fire, burning within Yosemite National Park, is also burning within Federal Wilderness. While it is widely understood that motorized equipment such as off-highway vehicles, dozers, or other mechanized equipment are not allowed in wilderness, this requirement is also largely true when fighting fires in wilderness. Chainsaws, small portable water pumps and similar equipment is often allowed to operate during active fires, but large, ground disturbing equipment is still prohibited.

In 1964, Congress passed the Wilderness Act, which required that designated wilderness areas “Shall be administered for the use and enjoyment of the American people in such manner as will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness, and so as, to provide for the protection of these areas, (and) the preservation of their wilderness character.

One way that National Parks and the Wildland Fire Agency manage fire within Wilderness areas is by using Minimum Impact Suppression Techniques (MIST). While MIST is not intended to represent a separate or distinct classification of firefighting tactics but rather a mindset - how to suppress a wildfire while minimizing the long-term effects of the suppression action. MIST is the concept of using the minimum tool to accomplish the task safely and effectively.

While MIST emphasizes suppressing wildland fire with the least impact to the land, actual fire conditions and good judgment will dictate the actions taken. Incident commanders, operations chiefs, and all the boots on the ground must still consider what is necessary to halt fire spread and containment within the fireline or designated perimeter boundary, while safely managing the incident. Use of MIST **will not** compromise firefighter safety or the effectiveness of suppression efforts.

So, after all this discussion, what is MIST? MIST on the ground could mean many things. It could be using hotshot crews to connect rocky, boulder outcroppings together on a ridge, or connecting hiking trails to streams and wet meadows. There are many ways to accomplish MIST, the only two requirements are to know how fire will react as it moves across the landscape, and the ability to connect natural features together to make an effective barrier to fire growth. Within Yosemite, the most effective barriers are rocky outcroppings, wet meadows, rivers and streams and previous fire scars. All these features give MIST a starting point to manage fire within wilderness areas.