

Basic History and Summary Narrative of the Little Sand Fire

The Little Sand Fire was started by lightning on May 13, 2012 in steep, inaccessible terrain in the Weminuche Creek drainage. The fire stayed north of the Piedra River, spreading into the Weminuche, Trail Creek, Little Sand, and Sand Creek drainages south of the Mosca Road. At the southern end, it burned into the Piedra Area all the way to the First Fork of the Piedra.

Most of area is unroaded, with terrain that's a combination of steep drainages and flat, cliff-rimmed benches. Mixed conifer forests and aspen stands dominate the drainages and side slopes, with ponderosa pine on the benches and south facing slopes. Some of the mixed conifer stands on the west and north sides of the area have significant amounts of standing dead trees from a recent bark beetle infestation.

The rugged terrain, lack of existing roads, standing dead trees, and the large expanses of uninterrupted fuels combined to create firefighter safety concerns. Because of this, direct suppression tactics were limited, being utilized primarily in key areas of concern such as near private lands. Confine/contain strategies were employed in the remainder of the fire area. The fire burned actively until July 4 and was finally called out on September 24, 2012.

The fire burned a total of 24,931 acres. Post-fire assessments indicated that approximately 64% of the fire burned with low severity, 15% at moderate severity, and 6% at high severity. The remaining 15% of the area within the fire perimeter was unburned.

It has long been recognized that the fire-dependent forests on the Pagosa Ranger District would benefit from low- to moderate- severity, non-stand replacement fires. The Little Sand Fire provided these conditions, reducing fuels, encouraging aspen regeneration, improving wildlife habitat by stimulating the growth of grasses and forbs in the understory, providing a more effective/defensible buffer to private lands in the Weminuche Valley and Upper Piedra area, and providing greater management flexibility when dealing with fires in the future.