

*'We
rebuilt that
relationship'*

**Ben Jacobs: An interview
with ANPR's summer
intern Analisa Skeen**

*Ben Jacobs at the Hart
prescribed burn in
Sequoia and Kings Canyon
National Parks.*

BEN JACOBS WAS THE FUELS MANAGEMENT SPECIALIST AT SEQUOIA AND KINGS CANYON NATIONAL PARKS FROM MARCH 2002 TO OCTOBER 2014. DURING AN INTERVIEW CONDUCTED FOR THE ANPR ORAL HISTORY PROJECT, JACOBS REFLECTED ON THE TENUOUS RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PARKS' FIRE PROGRAM AND THE SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY UNIFIED AIR POLLUTION CONTROL DISTRICT

JACOBS: The reality of the Sierra Nevada [is that] the air wasn't clean here, historically. There were fires burning because there was lightning, there was Native American burning. The place burned and the air quality probably was pretty bad at times. When I first got there [the parks] were at odds with the Air District and it was kind of a mating dance between myself and the individuals on their side.

We were trying to put fire in the landscape, which we consider to be very important, whether it's for giant sequoia [regeneration] or trying to maintain a healthy forest. But the Air District had a mission that was perpendicular to ours; where they need[ed] to watch out for [human] health and air quality. So we were naturally going to be at odds.

It got really bad after the 2003 fire season. There was a lot of smoke in the southern Sierra because we were managing [natural] fires and we were fighting fire. We had a lot of fires in the park and we live in one of the most polluted air basins in the nation, there's no disputing that. And the Air District kind of flipped out on us because they felt they had lost control, because they couldn't regulate our natural fires.

And then we lit the Tharp's burn with their permission in late June 2004. I was the prescribed fire manager for that burn, which meant I was briefing the superintendent and running interference with the Air District.

After we lit it, the next day they told us, "You can't light anymore." Like this isn't the deal you know? We can't just turn this thing off like a light switch. We got a fire on the hill. We're not going to dig fire line through a sequoia grove.

I was briefing the superintendent on this and he asked me, "Well, what do you think we should do?" I said, "We've got to finish this burn... The longer that thing just sits up there... the greater the odds something could go wrong." He basically just said, "Go ahead and do it."

I remember radioing up to the guys on the hill, "Hey, Superintendent gave the

thumbs up. Just continue burning." But I'm the guy who has to call the Air District and tell them. After they tell us, "You can't burn," I had to call them and say, "We're burning anyway." And then sure enough, a couple of months later, the citation [with a \$25,000 fine] arrived in the mail. We knew it was coming. It was a low point.

SKEEN: How did you approach trying to rebuild that relationship?

JACOBS: It was little things that turned it around through the years. I was working with them as the burn boss [on a prescribed burn in 2005], but I was also their contact. [I thought,] "If we can burn these seven acres that we had to do on this blackline at the top, this will enable us to be able to burn this thing really quick." Because it

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would be better if we burned in to better [smoke dispersal] conditions versus waiting for good conditions and then we burn into bad conditions. And they got that.

So they let us burn these seven acres on a no-burn day, which isn't much, but the burn window came through and we were poised to light ... 350 acres in two days. It worked out great; it was a model for how we should cooperate with each other and they totally got that.

Then right after we lit that thing, this huge high pressure dome sat in, huge heat wave, and that smoke didn't ventilate

anymore. It went right down into the Sequoia Lake [YMCA Camp]. I remember I drove down there because I heard it was bad, and there was the classic asthmatic kids and everything. I got on the radio, "Get people up there mopping up. We've got to start putting this thing out because this is bad." We told the Air District, "We're well aware of the problem. We're mopping it up. We're trying to put it out." And that bought us a lot of credibility, that we could be responsible.

Then that [September], we lit the Quarry burn up in Giant Forest and that was about 350 acres or so and the smoke got pretty bad [on day four] down in Three Rivers. I was getting word up as the burn boss that "it's pretty bad." And so we [said], "Okay let's just shut it down for a day and let it ventilate."

The Air District was calling the parks saying, "You guys can continue burning today." And we told them, "Actually we shut ourselves down because we felt we were impacting Three Rivers." And again, it bought us all this credibility with them: "Well, maybe we can actually trust these guys."

That was where it started turning around. I think they wanted to have a voice, and they felt like they didn't have a voice during the big fires of '03. Now I can say when I retired last year, for several years they'd been calling us saying, "Hey you got a burn window coming up, do you have anything you can burn?" I mean, completely 180 degrees difference.

We rebuilt that relationship. Here you have one of the worst air basins in the nation and you have a program that can actually prescribe burn. I feel pretty proud of that. I always thought we were much closer to being on the same side than either one of us realized.

Ben Jacobs retired from the National Park Service in 2014.

Analisa Skeen is a volunteer for the ANPR Oral History Project.