Controlled burn set for lake

By DAVE CLARK

The National Park Service is expected to conduct a controlled burn on roughly four acres of Lake Mead National Recreation Area in the Northshore Springs.

Officials described the burn as needed to improve the habitat of the relict leopard frog by removing dense vegetation from the area. The removal will also help prevent a catastrophic fire from enveloping the entire springs area, they said. The two-hour burn was tentatively rescheduled for Dec. 13 after storm systems delayed plans to start the fire last Friday, Lake Mead spokeswoman Roxanne Dey said.

Park Service officials and UNLV researchers with the Public Lands Institute are studying the activities of the frog, a species which is now found only naturally in the Lake Mead area, UNLV research assistant professor Jef Jaeger said. He called the burn an experiment which will be analyzed to see if it benefits the frog over time. The burn will target dense vegetation along the banks of the streams; frogs respond better to more open vegetation, Jaeger said.

"It's grown very dense over time," Jaeger said. "A little bit of disturbance is good."

The frog is considered very rare, and the effort aimed at developing a management strategy could help it stay off the endangered species list. The frog was native to the upper region of the Colorado, Virgin and Muddy rivers, but has declined, Jaeger said. A 2001 estimate pegged the population at roughly 1,100 in the Lake Mead area. Jaeger noted that the two native species of frog in Lake Mead are integral to the maintenance of the park's ecosystem.

"Frogs are predators of insects as well as food for other organisms," Jaeger said.

Officials are also seeking to prevent a future catastrophic fire along the spring system by reducing the fuel load in the area. Dey noted the area is dryer due to drought and could be vulnerable to a lightning strike.

"It's to create a fire break along the system, so if part of the springs system catches fire, the whole system won't burn up," Jaeger said.

Jaeger is also hoping for a positive response from native plant species.

The smoke is expected to be visible from Northshore Road and from the air.

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