

Native Pasture Burning, it's time to Plan

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Developing a burn plan; The key components of a good burning plan are: identifying goals for the burn, an inventory of the area, defining the weather conditions under which the burn will be conducted, reviewing safety requirements, knowing local and state regulations, determining manpower and equipment requirements, and developing contingency plans. Good planning will go a long way in helping conduct a prescribed burn that is safe and accomplishes the desired goals.

Why do we burn native grass? There are a large number of reasons to conduct a prescribed burn on grassland. Maintaining/ conserving the natural integrity of the prairie, brush and weed control, wildlife habitat manipulation, improvement of grazing distribution, and increased livestock production are a few of the more commonly cited reasons for burning. Prescribed burning will not only remove litter, but can help stimulate rhizomatous species such as Big bluestem and Indian grass. Denser grass stands protect the soil and reduce runoff. Annual burning is not required to accomplish all these goals, but will need to be done at least 1 out of every 3 or 4 years. Annual burning has become an annual practice in pasture used for stocker cattle. Research has shown these cattle can gain 10 to 12 percent more on late spring burned than on either unburned or early burned pastures.

When should native be burned? This has been the subject of a lot of discussion. The timing of the prescribed burn is dependent on the purpose. If the goal is to use fire as a tool to help with brush and weed control, it should be done in late spring, when those plants have started growing. Another “rule of thumb” is that the time to burn is when there is 2 to 3 inches of new growth in the native grass. In most years, this will occur in this area from mid to late April. The start of the native growth should not be confused with the earlier green-up of cool-season plants. Having an effective late spring burn is dependant on proper grazing the previous year to insure that around 50% of the growth is left for a good fuel load. Early spring burning is used as a tool to increase forb (weeds and wildflower) production in wildlife areas.

Know your local regulations regarding prescribed burning. Who do you call when you want to burn? Notification of the fire department and/or the sheriff's office is normally required. Notifying your neighbors is also a good policy.

A crew is generally needed to conduct a burn. One person to light the fire, one to drive the sprayer, one to handle the nozzle, and one to follow with hand tools to make sure all fires are under control is the minimum. Equipment needed to conduct a prescribed burn includes ignition equipment such as a drip torch and suppression equipment including a spray rig, fire swatters, and rakes.

Carefully planned and conducted prescribed burns can still escape. Have a contingency plan. Use your original inventory to reassess hazards that need protected and where fires could potentially escape. Have a clear plan on when the fire department will be contacted and do you have the proper equipment and enough manpower to attack an escaped fire without endangering people. If a prescribed burn is in your plans this year take time to think about the time and conditions to conduct the burn and how much manpower and equipment is needed to do so safely.