

Why is Burning Pastureland necessary

March gracefully made its way in and the weather has been gorgeous! March combined with ideal weather also brings with it the start of rangeland burning. In 2019 between March 15th and May 5th, Butler County had 240,021 acres of rangeland burned. Butler County was 4th in the total number of acres burned behind Chase, Greenwood, and Osage Counties. What does this mean and why are ranchers burning their pastures? A prescribed burn is conducted to meet specific management objectives. In fact, the Native Americans are thought to have used fire on what are now Kansas grasslands for the past millennia for some of the same reasons ranchers use fire today – Such as providing high quality forage for food animals, reducing woody plant encroachment into grasslands, increasing desirable vegetation, decreasing undesirable vegetation (including weeds), enhance livestock performance, improve plant vigor, removal of litter and thatch, maintain the prairie ecosystem, reduce wildfire severity just to name a few. On top of all of that, it also helps ranchers stay in compliance with CRP contract requirements.

Timing of pasture burning is crucial to the goal of the prescribed burn. Burning for the benefit of providing higher quality forage to the livestock occurs earlier than that of those burning to control weeds and wood species. Rangeland burning is not an easy process no matter what the desirable goal is. Winds, smoke dispersion, moisture, and resources available all play a factor in having a successful burn.

Smoke from prescribed burning can affect air quality both nearby and in downwind locations; the health of both human and animals can be affected by poor air quality. When wind transport and conditions are right, smoke can impact urban areas and present a health risk to sensitive individuals. Due to this, the Kansas Flint Hill Smoke Management Plan was developed and goes into effect on April 1st. I will be sharing more information on this plan in later articles.

What's important to know is that producers are not just out there lighting a match to be burning. There is a goal and a purpose behind what they are doing. Burning is not easy! A lot of time is invested by ranchers planning, preparing, making sure they have the adequate equipment and are fully prepared for their burn. Certain weather conditions are needed to prevent smoke from blowing across roads, protecting property around them, and keeping their fire in control. Sometimes, despite the best efforts, mother nature does exist and weather conditions can and do change and fires can change directions and become out of control. If you see smoke blowing across the road do not drive into it!

More information on the Smoke Management Plan can be found at www.ksfire.org and rangeland burning on our website at https://www.butler.k-state.edu/agriculture/ag_info.html.