

Information Contact: Susan Henning
Kay County Conservation District
Phone: 580-362-2438
February 13, 2015

Prescribed Burn Not Synonymous to Controlled Burn

Submitted by Susan Henning

Whether it's to control invasive plant species, get more ground-level food and access for birds in a native grass planting, or bring more prairie plants to bloom, you might want to consider a prescribed burn. Prescribed burning is using a planned fire to improve vegetation on a piece of land whereas a "controlled burn" is little more than a wildfire out of control. Landowners and managers must understand their responsibilities under Oklahoma law and how to plan and conduct a burn safely. A prescribed burn is for a designated area, with specific environmental parameters and are extinguished before leaving the site. "Safe burns are no accident!"

Prescribed burns identify sensitive areas adjacent to and downwind from the planned burn, provide personal protective gear including communications gear, use safe firing setting techniques, create firebreaks either discing strips at least 8-10 feet wide around the area or using roadways and streams to prevent fire spread and have equipment in good working order to manage the fire and handle emergencies. Equipment might include a pumper with at least 100 gallons of water and 50 feet of hose. Notification of adjacent landowners within 60 days of a burn is required. Also a Prescribed Burn Notification Plan should be filed with local rural fire department with a notification given within 48 hours of the actual burn.

The fire plan should include weather details such as wind speed, temperature, relative humidity and next major wind shift fronts. Red Flag weather conditions to cancel a burn would be wind gusts greater than 20 mph, relative humidity below 20 percent, air temperature above 100 degrees, and wind shifts or frontal passage within 12 hours of the planned burn.

The timing of a prescribed burn depends on the goals a landowner wants to achieve. You can set back existing vegetation, remove litter, control woody plants and "release" more desirable species by burning. It can stimulate growth of new plants, particularly legumes that offer food for wildlife. Fire won't always improve wildlife habitat, but will if it's done at the right time in the right situation. Which grass or other plants you stimulate depends on the time of year you burn. For instance, April and May grassland burns will stimulate the dormant warm season grasses and forbs more than cool season species. (But it could destroy nests, so don't burn all you grassland at one time.) Late winter burns generally stimulate cool season grasses. Fall burns control woody vegetation. Burning a third of the area you want to improve for wildlife each year is a good idea.

OSU Extension Fact Sheet E-927 "Using Prescribed Fire in Oklahoma" is a useful tool for prescribed burn planners and includes the notification form to be submitted to local rural fire departments. The Oklahoma Mesonet site provides up-to-date weather conditions and fire safety information at <http://okfire.mesonet.org>. Another helpful website is The Oklahoma Prescribed Burn Association (OPBA), www.ok-pba.org. The OPBA has partnered with the Samuel Roberts Noble Foundation and the Bramlett Agency for purchase of prescribed burn insurance to protect landowners and managers or reduce claims for damage. All insured prescribed burners must follow all local and state statutes and ordinances and meet notification requirements.

The Newkirk Field Office for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) can help landowners design a prescribed burn plan to improve vegetation for livestock or wildlife habitat. Contact the NRCS/Kay County Conservation District Office at 5501 N. Pleasant View Avenue in Newkirk or call for more information at (580) 362-3362 or (580) 362-2438.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at 202-720-2600 (voice and TDD). To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326 W, Whitten Building, 14th and Independence Avenue, SW, Washington D. C. 2050-9410 or call 202-720-5964 (voice or TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.