

David Hallauer, Agent
Meadowlark Extension District
Crop and Soils, Horticulture

Prescribed Burn Planning

With snow on the ground and feeding or calving taking the majority of your time, planning for a prescribed burn is probably the last thing on your mind! That's understandable – but it doesn't mean it's not time to plan! Start by asking yourself a few questions:

Do I need to burn? If there is no advantage to grass or livestock from a prescribed fire, does it need to occur? Cool season forages (brome and fescue) don't respond to fire like warm season species do. In fact, regular fire could harm the stand rather than encourage it. Even warm season forages don't *require* an annual prescribed burn to thrive.

In situations where brush control with fire is the intent, understanding the growth and development of those species is needed. Deciduous trees (hedge, locust, etc. don't leaf out until temperatures warm a little. That means that the low in the root energy reserve cycle doesn't occur when we are trying to burn a cool season pasture – typically early March. That means we often won't get very good control of those species. A fire about any time can control cedar trees, but it requires enough fuel for the fire to defoliate trees so they can't grow back. That takes a lot of fuel! Do you have enough fuel left to allow the fire to carry and do what you need it to do?

Are you prepared to burn? Check local regulations to gain an understanding of the requirements to initiate a burn. If a permit is required, what are the requirements? Make sure you understand all local regulations before initiating the burn.

Preparation also includes everything from equipment needed during the burn to preparation of the area to be burned. Make sure adequate fire breaks have been mowed or tilled. Take time to learn about fire behavior and the changes that occur based on topography and other obstacles. Know your pasture species! Most grasses will respond best to fire when they are anywhere from a half inch up to two inches tall. Knowing your grasses can give you a heads up on when that burn has to occur for best results from a grass response standpoint.

Make sure equipment is capable of controlling the fire. Use back burns when possible and be sure that you have a knowledgeable and capable crew in place to help. Prescribed burns are a great way to clean up unwanted brush and nuisance trees – but only if you are prepared to conduct the burn and are able to carry it out in such a manner that you received your desired outcome. Start planning now to determine if a prescribed burn is the best option. If it is, continue preparations to give you an effective – and SAFE! – prescribed burn