

Meadowlark District Extension News
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Conducting a Prescribed Burn

The ability to use a prescribed burn as part of our forage management is dictated to a large degree by weather. Do we have enough wind to carry a fire, but not so much that its dangerous? Has grass started greening up yet so that it's ready to burn? What about moisture levels. This year, our moisture levels – and the continued presence of snow – may hinder our ability to carry a fire the way we'd like to.

In all likelihood, everything will 'break loose' at one time. The snow will melt. Temperatures will rise. Grass will start to grow – and we'll all want to be burning at the same time. For that burn to be safe and successful, now is the time to get prepared.

The key to keeping a prescribed burn from becoming a wildfire comes in that preparation. That means that right now you should be thinking about what equipment you'll need and preparing the site for a burn that may occur in as little as a few weeks from now on our cool season pastures. Make sure all pumps, hoses, and tanks on firefighting equipment are in good working order. Is your pump properly sized for the flow needed for putting out a fire? Some ATV sprayers may not be. Do pump engines work correctly? Are hoses in good working order? A prescribed burn needs to occur in our very short window of opportunity. Safety should not be compromised and a burn may need to be cancelled if equipment isn't ready.

Ask yourself as you plan – why am I burning? What benefit is this fire going to do for my forage stand or wildlife habitat? Cool season grasses don't tend to respond to fire like warm season prairie grasses do. In fact, if burned too frequently or at the wrong time, stands can be harmed. Further, if you are trying to take out brush or taller cedar trees, do you have enough fuel, and will it be flammable during the appropriate time? If ample fuel loads are not available to burn up small cedar trees, or if burns are being conducted prior to the beginning of regrowth on our brush species (as is often the case with our cool season grasses), control will not be as effective as you'd like. At that point, other management options may better help you achieve your desired objective.

Last, but not least – have you given appropriate attention to safety? Have you obtained the proper permits required by local authorities to conduct the burn? Do you have proper clothing, equipment, and tools to safely spread and quickly put out fires? Do you have a back burn or tilled area or laid out other methods to prevent fire spreading to places you don't want it to? A formal burn plan with efforts coordinated by a burn boss is key to making sure that the burn achieves its desired objective in a manner safe to man, machine, and structure. Much of that effort can be undertaken now so that when it's time to start the prescribed burn, you are ready to go.

Need a burn plan? Your local NRCS Office or Wildlife Biologist can likely help. Our District Extension Offices have numerous resource publications available to help you plan, as well as a video available for checkout if you want to learn some techniques. Contact us if you want to discuss a prescribed burn and whether it's right for you!