

David Hallauer
District Extension Agent, Crops & Soils

Conducting a Prescribed Burn – Planning for Success

Spring has traditionally been ‘burn season’ in Kansas. If a spring prescribed fire is on your radar, plan now to make it successful – and safe.

Much of our ability to safely conduct a prescribed burn depends on weather. Do we have enough wind to carry a fire, but not so much its dangerous? Optimum conditions usually occur when wind speeds are above five but below 15 miles per hour with relative humidities in the 50-60 percent range and temperatures between 50 and 80 degrees. You can check out wind and relative humidity fairly easily at www.mesonet.ksu.edu/fire/rh.

What kind of a stand are we dealing with? Is there enough fuel to carry a fire and can we manage heavy fuel loads that may be present? What is our purpose for burning? Cool season grasses don’t respond the same way native prairie grasses do and typically shouldn’t be burned as frequently unless a brush issue is being addressed. Even then, an understanding of how the undesirable and desirable plant community may respond is important to determining necessity.

Is equipment ready? Conditions can change rapidly during spring burns. Make sure you have equipment to provide the water flow you need to put out a fire (some ATV sprayers may not) – and people to man said equipment. Back burns should be in place and a burn boss appointed to make sure things run smoothly.

Check with local authorities first. Burn permit requirements vary by area, and many fire departments are manned by volunteers, potentially limiting response ability on busy burn days. Plan ahead to make sure burns are allowed, then follow a plan to make sure they can be conducted safely.

Prescribed fire can be a valuable tool for our forage stands when used effectively. Make sure you have a plan to help it be as effective as possible, including evaluating the necessity of it in the first place. A little forethought can make a big difference in both the effectiveness AND the safety of your spring burn.