

Fire on the Land: The Consequences Part 3

The following is the final article of a three part series about the role of fire as a natural and human agent on the land. The first article gave a historical perspective. The second article explained why and how fire is being reintroduced as a land management tool. This final article will go over more of the specifics in planning and implementing a prescribed fire.

Once a landowner has decided that fire is a proper management tool to use to meet his or her specific management and ecological objectives, then the landowner must commit to a long term plan in advance of the actual prescribed burn. This begins with sound range, livestock and wildlife management both before and after the actual burn. With that in mind the actual plan which includes the prescription should be written. This is called a burn plan, which should be filed with and written with the guidance of a certified prescribed burn manager, NRCS or the local burn association. Along with the plan, the landowner should acquire adequate liability insurance as protection for themselves and their neighbors.

The plan or prescription is in the form of a checklist, usually recommended by the NRCS, TPWD, TFS, USFW, PBAT or other agencies actively engaged in prescribed burning and covering everything from pre-burn management, to safe guards, equipment needed, required weather conditions, the actual burn steps, and etc. One must first plan for adequate fuel, in other words it "takes a lot of grass for an effective burn." Therefore depending on the range conditions a landowner must commit to deferring grazing or under stocking for a half year or more depending on the time of year of the burn and growing conditions.

The next part of the plan would be to begin making arrangements to put the necessary controls in place. This would include the construction of fire-lanes, usually bulldozed strips of land from 7-15' wide, around the perimeter of the area to be burned. This should be done close enough to the time of the burn so that new vegetation within the lane does not have time to develop as a potential fuel. Necessary equipment including adequate suppression units and an experienced crew should be planned for and listed in the prescription. One of the controls that may be done before or the day of the prescribed burn is the burning of black-lines, which again are done under a prescription. These strips of land about 100 to 200 ft. in width are burned by setting what's called a backfire near the edge of the fire-lane down wind so the fire creeps slowly into the wind and is then extinguished once it has reached a desired width.

Communication with one's neighbors, local fire department, and sheriff's office in both the planning stage and the day of the fire is imperative. The neighbors especially need to understand the process and be included as much as possible. This brings up the need to consider where the smoke is going to go the day of your burn, and who it might affect. Therefore depending on the situation, the neighbors, nearby communities, and roadways need to be addressed by including smoke management in the plan.

Under the guidelines of our local burn association, Upper Llanos Prescribed Burn Association, the anticipated date of the prescribed burn should be put on the association's group email so equipment, personnel, and emergency support can be allocated. However, this can only be a target date because the prescribed weather conditions called for in the plan often do not fit a human calendar and must be monitored closely as the scheduled date approaches. Starting with

the morning of the burn and continuing through the day, weather conditions should be closely monitored on the ground. If factors such as, temperature, humidity, or wind go out of the range set in the prescription then the burn may not begin, be delayed, or may be shut down before completed.

Whether on the day the black lines are burned or the day of the actual prescribed burn, every person involved should be informed of their roles, be in communication by radios, and follow the plan under the direction of the burn boss. There is no item or condition that should go unchecked in order to have a safe and effective burn. Following the burn, the landowner continues his commitment to the long term plan by deferring grazing, allowing the grasses and forbs time to come back. This again depends on the landowner's objectives; however one obvious reason would be to get cover back on the newly exposed soil to prevent erosion.

Fire on the land has and always will have consequences. Today those consequences depend on whether it is a wildfire, burning out of control through the heavy fuel load of a cedar break, or a prescribed burn, carried out with a thorough plan in the form of a prescription, which is written and implemented not only to reach the landowner's objectives, but also to address all those who might be affected both directly and indirectly. It has been the objective of the Upper Llanos Prescribed Burn Association for this three part series on fire to better inform the public of the consequences of fire both past and present and to better understand its value to land stewardship, when applied in a scientific and controlled manner, with all possibilities planned for and addressed.

For more information and questions, interested parties should contact the local NRCS office. For information on our local burn association, visit the ULPBA website www.ulpba.org, which includes educational material from experts and experienced prescribed burners, as well as guidelines and policies for members and a membership application. Or contact ULPBA through the website for further information.

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