

Use Fire With Caution and Respect in Vegetation Management

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

These past couple of weeks weren't good ones if you were a rural fire fighter. Controlled burns that got out of control, homeowners failing to abide by no-burn rules, or even just accidental fires by smokers flipping cigarettes out of car windows all led to a bunch of fire runs and long hours fighting grass fires often under hot and windy conditions!

Let's start with the legalities of open burning in Kansas. Open burning is any fire that is outside of a building. Prescribed pasture burns, piles of branches, bonfires, cooking fires in grills even trash fires in a burn barrel are all classified as open burns. Open burns in Kansas are regulated by both state and local regulations. There are many very specific regulations pertaining to them. Ask me if you'd like to see the long list!

In Geary County, open burning, other than cooking fires and burn barrel fires, are regulated and require both a burn permit and permission to burn. If you are a rural resident and want to burn a pile of branches, you have to have that permit and call in for permission to burn. Failure to obtain permission does open you up to fines and penalties and after this last week, those fines may be increasing! In periods of extreme fire risk, the county can also lock down ALL open burning including burn barrels. April will be here very soon and during April Geary County is under additional open burning restrictions as part of the Flint Hills Smoke Management Plan.

Kansas law is also very specific about conditions and responsibility for open burning. Certain atmospheric and weather conditions must be met before a fire can be initiated. The law also states that if you light the fire, you are responsible for it until it is done and you or your appointee must stay with it the entire time. If something goes wrong, you are responsible. Therefore, keep it under control and don't send smoke over a road!

With the legalities out of the way, let's talk about the practicalities. Regardless of the past couple days of cooler and damper weather, the area is very dry. Vegetation is very dry. Earlier in the week we had temperatures above 70 degrees, winds over 15 mph (pretty much the upper limit for safe burning conditions) and very low humidity. Under these conditions, the vegetation is highly flammable, perhaps better described as explosively flammable. In these cases it is difficult to get enough water on an out of control fire to stop it. The National Weather Service issues Red Flag warnings on these days for a very good reason.

For the next six weeks at least, we need everyone's cooperation. Pay attention to the weather and the law. On days when Red Flag warnings are issued, don't do any outside burning of any kind. In Geary County, there's a new website, gearyfire.org that is updated daily and will tell you if burning will be allowed. If you are thinking of burning, start there. On days when burning is allowed, and you have called in for permission to burn, proceed with great caution. It's dry and there may not be a lot of prescribed burning this season for very good reason. If you are a smoker, DO NOT toss ashes or cigarettes out the window. You may not think it's a risk, but we've had several wildfires started already this season from smoking materials.

Fire is a very crucial tool in our landscape management toolbox. But to keep it available as a tool means we have to respect it and use it carefully. It doesn't matter if you need to burn one acre or one thousand acres, it can get out of hand in a hurry without planning, training and the right equipment. Use it, when appropriate, and respect it, always!