

Is This a Good Year Not to Burn?

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

We are rapidly moving in to the time of year when we would normally start to see billows of smoke rising up from the prairies of the Flint Hills. The past several years we have seen smoke, we have seen a lot of smoke as we conduct prescribed burns on the pastures as a crucial management tool in our overall management of these native tall grass prairies. I know that at times this has not been a popular thing as we deal with short term degradation in local air quality. In fact, I can remember one or two days in the past couple of years that it was pretty bad even for those of us who don't have respiratory challenges.

From preliminary surveys that I've done with pasture managers in recent days, I suspect that this year is going to be quite a bit different, if it doesn't start raining and raining significantly. About one third of my respondents said that they were planning on normal levels of burning and about 2/3 said less burning to no burning, depending on the weather. Which then brings up the question of whether this is a good year NOT to be burning. We know that conducting prescribed burns in years with below average rainfall when the season starts with below normal soil moisture will result in less grass production so be prepared for that if you do burn.

If you have already decided what you're going to do this year, that's great. I'm not telling anyone that they shouldn't be burning this year. But what you have to ask yourself is if you have a reason to burn. What we do every year is called prescribed burning. We are doing it to meet the needs of a "prescription" if you will and before a prescription is written, there are symptoms that we are dealing with.

The most often symptom that we are dealing with is cedar tree or woody brush invasion. We know that if you are dealing with a serious brush or cedar tree invasion then two to four consecutive years of burning is often required to get control or at least to start to get the upper hand. If you are part way through a series of burns then, assuming we have good weather to conduct the burn, go ahead and burn. If you are burning to control cedar trees, then you can do that anytime of the year including January and February. If you are burning to control buckbrush and dogwood (burning won't control sumac) then burn as late into April as you can, even early May. The more spring growth that the woody shrubs have when you burn, the more damage you will do.

If you are burning for improved stocker performance on yearlings, especially under intensive early stocking, then burning in late April has advantages. Interestingly, cow calf herds do not see an improvement in performance, probably because early in the season calves are getting most of their nutrition from momma. So pastures with cow/calf herds likely don't need to be burned this year if you burned last year and you aren't in the middle of a multi-year brush control plan.

Given the forecast, regardless if you burn this year or not, you need to be prepared to do a mid-season forage evaluation and have a plan in place to reduce stocking rates if it remains dry. Always remember to follow local burning regulations and take time to check out the Flint Hills Smoke Management website at <http://www.ksfire.org/> for up to date impacts on smoke from your prescribed burn.