

Prescribed Burning Season is Upon Us

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

With the arrival, finally, of some warmer and drier weather this past week the spring prescribed burning season also arrived. I was driving back from Parsons in the southern Flint Hills early last week and after dark you could see fires everywhere and the entire drive was shrouded in smoke. At least locally, I suspect we will see less burning than average this year for a variety of reasons. Unfortunately, it doesn't mean that it will be less smoky in our area as that smoke can travel long distances.

Contrary to what some people may think, we don't burn pastures just for the fun of it. It's called prescribed burning and most, if not all, producers have very specific reasons for why and when they burn their pastures. While not all inclusive, following are the most common reasons.

The number one reason for burning pastures is to keep them as productive grasslands instead of a cedar forest followed by a hardwood forest. The Flint Hills has many areas where the soil simply isn't thick enough to be productive crop land which is why it is still grassland. When fire is removed woody species start to move in and move in aggressively. Periodic burning is essential to keep grassland as grassland.

Burning is also a good way to improve animal performance. When yearling steers are grazed on burned pastures they will have more weight gain than when grazed on unburned pastures. Part of this is the simple fact that new grass growth is highly nutritious. In unburned prairies that new grass growth is mingled with old dead grass from last year which lowers its nutritional content. It is important to note that while yearling steer herds show this improved performance, cow/calf herds do not.

That reason ties in with how cattle graze. Cattle will randomly begin grazing in the spring. They will tend to go back to the same area because as the grazed grass regrows it is better tasting and more nutritious than grass that had been growing ungrazed. This effect is called patch grazing. If a pasture is not burned, the cattle tend to go back to the areas that were most heavily grazed last year. It also helps that they don't have to stick their head down into a bunch of prickly old grass stems from last year. By burning a pasture, the previous year's patch grazing is wiped clean and the cattle have a blank slate to start over with!

One reason for burning that is not often discussed is that periodic burning reduces wild fire risk. If a pasture isn't burned it will build up years of old dead grass. Yes, this old grass does slowly break down, but the build up of grass thatch on the prairie floor greatly increases the long term wildfire risk from lightning, discarded smoking materials or other accidental ignition. So prescribed burns, while involving fire, greatly reduce the wild fire risk.

You also need to be aware that agricultural burning is heavily regulated by the state and the county. In Geary County, to do any outdoor burning beyond a grill, fire pit or burn barrel, requires a burning permit and obtaining permission to burn. Burning is not allowed in Geary County under certain weather conditions. Burning in high winds is a recipe for disaster and under Kansas law, once you start a fire, you are responsible for it regardless of what happens.

Conducting a prescribed burn entails lots of planning, preparation and due diligence all the way through the process. The burn season will basically run through May 1st. If you have questions about prescribed burning, what it entails and why, please just give me a call at the Geary County Extension Office, 785-238-4161.