

Preparing for Pasture Burning Season

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

It may seem a little odd to be talking about pasture burning season in January when most pastures aren't going to be burned for two to three more months, but planning needs to start now. We've learned a lot about pasture burning in the past thirty years. Many of the theories and thoughts we had on pasture burning turned out to be wrong so we've started making adjustments. Some of these adjustments are also being brought about by our improved understanding of air quality issues and our attempts to reduce potential issues from smoke.

First and foremost the one thing that we have learned is that periodic fire is still a crucial part of the prairie ecosystem, and actually for most ecosystems around the globe. We call it prescribed burning because we do it to address certain management issues. It might be to control cedar trees and other brushy invading species. We may burn to even out the patchy grazing that livestock tend to show. We may burn to improve performance of yearling stocker cattle. We should never be burning just because it's fun to do. We need to be burning for a reason. Whatever issue we are trying to address can dictate what time of year the burn will occur.

We need to recognize that burning every year is often not the best approach. According to the drought monitor we are currently transitioning from abnormally dry to moderate drought. This is consistent with the fact that since September 1 we are at 59% of normal precipitation. When we burn we want to make sure that we have adequate soil moisture to encourage good early season growth. Soil moisture readings are marginal right now. January is our driest month of the year but it would be helpful to get a few precipitation events in February or early March! This is probably the most pressing situation that pasture managers need to be monitoring in coming weeks.

If you are burning mainly to control cedar trees, you do not have to wait until April. You can burn in February or March and control the cedars just fine. Burning on cooler days also eliminates ozone production which we do see on warmer days in April. Smoke is still created but we just don't get ozone formed and with fewer fires the smoke is less of an issue. Early burns don't really impact forage production and soil erosion isn't a big concern as roots of the grass plants are still present to hold the soil in place. Late February and March burns also encourage forb (wildflower) growth.

Even if you aren't sure if you may burn, you can still start prepping pastures to be burned. Mowing a firebreak around pastures now can allow you to easily burn those firebreaks well ahead of time so when that day comes with the wind in the right direction, you are ready to go. A ten to twenty foot firebreak is easily burned and will make the pasture burn go much easier when it is done well ahead of time. If it has been a few years since you burned a pasture and have some cedars getting some size to them it's also helpful to go in and cut down any that are close to the fire break and drag them away from the firebreak so you don't have a Roman candle going up sending sparks and embers everywhere.

Even if you have burned a pasture twenty times before, it's always a good idea to drive around the burn zone to reacquaint yourself with the lay of the land, the defensible boundaries and potential trouble spots. The more you can take care of before burn day, the easier and more effective of a prescribed burn you will be able to have!