

## **It's Fire Season, Planned and Unplanned!**

### **AGRI-VIEWS**

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

As evidenced by smoke in the air on some recent evenings, we have started the six to eight week annual event known as pasture burning season. As evidenced by the number of rural fire trucks that have been rolling out of town in recent days it's also the start of the wildfire season!

The tall grass prairies of the Flint Hills are burned periodically for different reasons. Some pastures are burned annually to provide improved cattle performance in yearlings. Some pastures are burned every few years to help reduce encroachment by brush and trees. Some pastures are burned to even out the grazing. Ultimately, while the smoke may be bothersome and an issue for a few weeks, the alternatives often involve herbicides or other chemicals to obtain the same results. If fire was totally removed from the tall grass prairies the amount of herbicides that would have to be applied to do the same thing as the fire would be enormous! Options have consequences.

When land managers perform prescribed burns please understand that they don't wake up some morning and decide that it's a good day to start a fire. There is a lot of advanced planning that is made to make sure that the fire can be done to achieve the desired results and minimizing the potential impact of smoke on safety and health. From now through early May there is even an online smoke management model that allows land managers to determine if today or tomorrow will be a good day to burn. Anyone can visit this model at [ksfire.org](http://ksfire.org). There are also additional state and local restrictions. During the month of April in the Flint Hills Smoke Management Plan counties, only agricultural burning is allowed, no brush piles. In Geary County you also have to have a burn permit and obtain permission to burn on that day. Some days just aren't safe to do a controlled burn due to temperature, relative humidity, wind speed or wind direction. There is a LOT of planning that goes in to conducting a prescribed burn.

What many people don't realize is that while fire can be a scary and dangerous beast, prescribed burns actually reduce the risk of wildfires and make them easier to control if they do start. If you remember the old fire triangle, it takes oxygen, heat and fuel for a fire to occur. The more fuel that there is, the bigger and hotter the fire will be and the longer it may last. If a pasture is burned that hasn't been burned for many years, there is a lot of old dry dead grass, what we call mulch, at ground level. When this is set on fire, some of it will burn fast, some will smolder for hours making it difficult to control after the initial fire goes through an area. In a pasture that's been burned regularly, the initial fire goes across the pasture and there is little or no old mulch for the fire to smolder in.

This is the time of year that temperatures are increasing. We have all the old dry fuel from last year. March is notorious for having windy conditions AND low relative humidity. Very little new vegetation is starting to grow yet. There is a lot of available fuel and it is extremely flammable. A cigarette butt tossed out a window can start a fire on the shoulder of the road very easily. Anything that makes a spark can launch a huge conflagration. If anything can make a spark, it can start a fire at this time of year. By early May vegetation is starting to green up so the fire risk drops considerably. But until then, everyone everywhere needs to be very careful with any fire or ignition source. When those rural fire trucks roll, it means people and property are at risk. It may be totally unintentional or it may be from thoughtless carelessness. In the weeks ahead be very careful so you aren't the cause of a massive wildfire!