

Column Name- The Heartland Minute

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“Kansas Fire Season Returns”

If you’ve lived in Kansas for any time at all, you know the state can throw some curve balls; especially when it comes to weather. We’ve recently seen some active grass fires getting out of control throughout our area. Despite our recent moisture, Kansas’s primary fuel (grass) is abundant due to last year’s above normal rainfall.

The Kansas Forest Service says (and as most producers in the Flint Hills already know), fire is a natural process that is essential to the health of forests and prairies alike and has long been used by property owners and land managers to prevent unwanted stands of brush and cedar trees. Used properly, it can be a valuable tool. Used incorrectly, it contributes too many escaped fires in Kansas that cause property damage to neighbors, and expense to already under-funded fire departments all over the state. There is also a push in some other areas, where smoke from spring burning in Kansas causes air quality issues (as far away as the Tennessee valley on some days) to restrict any open burning. Politically, this seems unlikely to happen in the near future, but with current hot button issues of global warming and greenhouse gasses, it is only common sense for landowners to police themselves so that outside regulations will not limit our use of this valuable tool in the future.

Recently the Greenwood County Extension office partnered with other local and state agencies to host the Flint Hills Burn School in Hamilton, KS. Throughout the day landowners heard from agency professionals on how to conduct a safe prescribed burn. The Kansas Forest Service was one of the agencies that presented at the Flint Hills Burn School, they give the following details on conducting a safe burn.

One of the first steps in burning is to develop a plan for proper burning and to assemble the needed equipment. Proper preparation is essential to conducting a safe burn. Also contact local fire or law enforcement authorities to see what permits or notifications are required to burn legally. Once the plan is developed, the site prepared, and the equipment and needed help available, the final step is to actually select a time to burn. The critical factor for this is to study weather forecasts carefully. Many of the escaped burns on private land in Kansas occur because someone begins burning on an ideal morning, without being aware of weather changes that are coming – either because a weather system is changing later in the day, or the normal daily changes that occur as a spring day gets hotter, drier, and windier over the course of the day, which dramatically changes the fire behavior.

If there is a Fire Weather Watch or Red Flag Warning issued, no burning should occur.

Check the Fire Weather Information section of your local National Weather Service office website to learn of any watches or warnings. The other valuable information to review in the fire weather forecasts include wind changes, lowest relative humidity (if it will likely drop below 20%, burning will be very

difficult to control), and other such factors that influence fire behavior. Items that are not fire safety related, but could impact future regulations, include transport winds and smoke dispersal. These help to identify where your smoke is going and who it will impact. If smoke dispersal is poor, wait to burn. If it is good, see where transport winds will take it.

If those wishing to burn will ensure that weather conditions will be safe, and that smoke dispersal will be good, without unduly impacting urban areas, prescribed fire will likely remain a useful resource in the land manager's tool box for years to come. If not, we may eventually find it regulated to the point of being unusable.

For more information regarding Agriculture and Natural Resources, 4-H Youth Development, or K-State Research and Extension call the office at 620-583-7455, email me, Lindsay Shorter, at lindsayshorter@ksu.edu, or stop by the office which is located inside the courthouse. Be sure to follow K-State Research and Extension- Greenwood County on Facebook for the most up-to-date information on Extension education programs and the Greenwood County 4-H program.