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Harness the Power of Prescribed Fire

Fire is an ecosystem driver facilitating other processes, like the nutrient or water cycle. Fire cannot work alone; the climate and vegetation are partners. Fire is mandatory for the health of prairies, shrublands, and forests. It's a necessary tool for managing wildlife, livestock, and timber. Research has shown that while many land management tools exist, there's no substitute for fire.

While the outcome of a wildfire can be similar to a prescribed fire, they are different. A prescribed fire has clear parameters, similar to a doctor prescribing for a health condition. A prescribed fire is safely conducted with a trained crew and adequate equipment under specific weather conditions.

Prescribed fire can improve forage production, quality, composition, and palatability for livestock or wildlife. Control for non-native plants as well as livestock parasites can be achieved. In forest situations, debris is reduced, and sites are prepared for replanting. Fire can be a sound herbicide alternative to reclaim native prairies—all of this with the added benefit of reducing the probability of wildfires.

Prescribed fire is essential in maintaining habitats for some species. Prairie chickens and quail rely on specific habitats for survival. When pastures become overgrown or are mismanaged, that specific habitat is no longer available.

The presence or quantity of certain plants indicates the quality of a pasture or recreational acreage. Underutilized land may have a large population of eastern redcedar, locust or elm trees, or other woody species growing unchecked. Overused acreages may only allow plants with low nutrient values to grow for wildlife or livestock.

Depending on the land manager's objectives, immediate changes resulting from any fire may be either desirable or undesirable. For example, if a small area in a native grass is burned, wild or domestic grazing animals will concentrate on the burned area, enjoying the fresh new growth that's now easier to access. This is called patch burning, patch grazing, or rotational grazing without fences, which does not reduce livestock production. The growing season after the fire and grazing event may cause the area to be transformed from native tall grasses to native annual

forbs that some may label as weeds. However, this is a short-term phenomenon, and the burned/grazed area will revert to pre-burned status with the correct stocking rate.

The key to successfully applying prescribed fire is to use it as part of an overall management plan that considers all of the operation's resources and is directed toward specific management objectives. Only then can fire be used successfully.

On March 7th, there will be a prescribed burn workshop for producers at the Southeast Research Center in Parsons, located off Highway 400. The event will cover the ins and outs of conducting a burn, fire breaks, timing, weather conditions, and more.

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