

When considering management of native plant communities in the Cross timbers region, the benefits of prescribed fire comes to mind. Fall is the time to be making plans for safe fire guard preparation. Fire has long been a part of the Oklahoma landscape. All of Oklahoma's wildlife habitat areas, or ecosystems, adapted in the presence of natural and man-made fire. All of the plants and animals in those habitats had adapted to, or even depended upon, fire as a primary factor in shaping their food supplies, reproductive strategies and general survival mechanisms. With the strong fire suppression that man has implemented in the last 50 to 100 years, these habitats have become dramatically altered, making them unsuitable for many of the native animals that formerly existed there. Grasslands experienced woody vegetation encroachment and open woodlands became closed canopy forests.

Prescribed or managed fire offers a tool for reclaiming diverse habitats that support a wide variety of flora and fauna. It can also be used to manage the danger of wildfire near residences. Prescribed fire is often used in combination with grazing, as recently burned sites offer excellent forage. However, fire in the absence of grazing is also a powerful tool.

Plants respond to fire in a number of ways. Frequent fires generally favor herbaceous over woody plants for a variety of reasons including growth form and location of meristematic tissue. Fire intensity affects plant response to fire and is often used in the management of woody species. The bark of older trees and shrubs commonly insulates the plant from the heat of low-intensity fires, but smaller stems and seedlings are killed. High intensity fire, however, can top-kill the larger trees. Woody plants that are capable of re-sprouting usually do so vigorously following fire.

Prescribed burning should be considered only after extensive burn safety training is obtained. Feature stories on prescribed fire may be found on the SUNUP TV link:

<http://sunup.okstate.edu/links>

For more information on prescribed burning, fire guard options, etc., please contact me or come by the office.

John Holman, Extension Educator Ag/Youth Development (580) 622-3016

OSU Extension Murray County, 3490 Highway 7 West, Sulphur, OK 73086

"The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service offers its programs to all eligible persons regardless of race, color, national origin, religion, gender, disability, marital or veteran status, or any other legally protected status, and is an Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity Employer."