

Burn Season

It's the time of year when prescribed burns, fires set under controlled conditions, become a favorite land management tool. Native grasslands benefit from the application of fire in late winter to early spring, because these communities are adapted to burn conditions. The fire removes the standing dead plant material, returning nutrients to the soil. It reduces competition from shrubs, trees, and non-native cool season grasses like fescue. Most native grasses grow best when the soil and air temperatures warm up. The blackened surface after a burn helps the soil warm up earlier and stimulates new grass growth helping the native grass in its competition with non-native species. The timing of the fires is important for the birds and mammals that live in the grass, as it is past the harsh winter and before the nesting and reproductive season. Prescribed burns are also used to help control non-native invasive species, like kudzu. Fire season has already started on the Oak Ridge Reservation (ORR) with burns near East Tennessee Technology Park and the George Jones Memorial Baptist Church off of State Highway 58. The ORR burns are conducted by Greg Byrd of the Natural Resource Management Team along with the Tennessee Department of Forestry. Backup fire control is provided by facility fire departments. More burns are planned for grasslands along Bethel Valley, on the Three Bends Management Area, and in the Bear Creek Valley. So, if you see a blackened field on your way to work, keep an eye on it through the spring to watch the grassland rebirth.