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BURN BABY BURN!

Burn Baby Burn! That's what most of the landscapes in Texas were designed to do. Traditionally, fire was an important element in the evolution of many of the pre-European settlement landscapes in Texas. The western grasslands, hill country, east Texas piney woods and coastal marshes were all shaped by the regular occurrence of fire. The vegetation and animal life that make their living on these landscapes were selected and shaped by each specie's ability to adapt and take advantage of regular fire occurrence. The effect of fire on the landscape can be seen in the vegetation. The frequency (how often) and seasonality (time of year) of fire determines the balance between woody species and grasses. Fire favors thick barked pines over thinner barked hardwoods. Fire invigorates grasslands by clearing old, rank vegetation. It recycles nutrients to the soil and opens up grassland and forested canopies to allow life-giving sunlight to the ground. Fire pushes back woody shrubs, favoring animals like turkey, quail and deer which prefer a mosaic of open grasslands and woodlands. Historically, fire favors grazers such as buffalo, antelope, cattle, deer, geese and the predators (including humans) that depend on them. It revitalizes and protects our coastal marshlands by keeping dominate marsh grass communities vigorous and healthy.

Prescribed fire is man's effort to mimic this natural force. It is a land manager's tool to attempt to shape the landscape and favor the plants and animals that are important to us. Our use of fire was learned from Native Americans. The Plains Indians knew that buffalo were drawn to fresh grass on recently burned prairies. Eastern tribes knew that deer and turkey favored



Marsh grass prescribed burn on Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge, Chambers County, Texas, Sept. 2007.

open, recently burnt forest floors. The first coastal Texans intentionally congregated thousands of migratory geese on freshly burned marshlands in the fall and winter. As Europeans moved west most thought this practice wasteful and dangerous. But slowly, over time and tragedy (degraded landscapes and destructive wildfires) we relearned the value of this tool. Today a well planned and executed prescribed fire is recognized as one of the most valuable techniques in a land manager's toolbox. What can prescribed fire do for

the Texas landowner in the 21st century? On the proper landscapes prescribed fire can:

- Protect your home and property from unwanted wildfire by removing excess and rank vegetation.
- Enhance your grasslands for grazing by invigorating native grasses and pushing back woody shrub incursion.
- Protect your pine woodlands from catastrophic wildfire by removing accumulated natural fuels.
- Enhance wildlife habitat (many of our preferred species favor lands that are burned regularly).

- Protect and enhance water quality by supporting healthy natural vegetation that is more resilient to hurricanes and seasonal flooding.
- Build durable landscapes that recover more quickly from natural disaster by restoring an important natural process.

Federal, state land management and conservation agencies have used prescribed fire for decades to meet many of the above objectives. My agency, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service first started utilizing prescribed fire in the 1930's in



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Pine understory prescribed burn at Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge, Harrison County, Texas, February 2013

support of longleaf pine and quail management. Most of the National Wildlife Refuges in Texas use prescribed fire as a habitat management tool. The National Forest of Texas and Big Thicket National Preserve have active prescribed burning programs for hazard reduction and wildlife management. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department actively use prescribed burns as a management tool on your state wildlife management areas and parks.

Each of these state and federal practitioners are required by their agencies to develop a certain level of training and experience to become proficient with this tool. What is required of the private landowner who wishes to have this valuable land management tool in their kit?

First, prescribed burning in Texas is regulated by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality

(TCEQ). The regulations governing prescribed fire can be found in TCEQ document RG-049, pg. 8, Outdoor Burning in Texas (<http://www.tceq.state.tx.us/publications/rg/rg-049.html>). This publication defines what burning is permissible in Texas and some broad parameters for burning. The regulations for coastal Texas counties are more restrictive and are defined in this document.

Education and support for landowners interested in prescribe burning in Texas can be obtained from the Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA). The TDA's prescribed burning program is managed by its Prescribed Burn Board (PBB). The PBB offers basic prescribed burning courses in each of its five prescribed burning regions. It also offers a training, experience and certification pathway to become a Certified and Insured Prescribed Burn Manager (CIPBM). The TDA website (<http://www.texasagriculture.gov/>

[Home/ProductionAgriculture/PrescribedBurnProgram.aspx](http://www.texasagriculture.gov/ProductionAgriculture/PrescribedBurnProgram.aspx)) offers links to find Certified Commercial Burn Managers and Certified Commercial Burn Instructors. This website can be an important first step in learning if prescribed burning is the right tool for you and your property.

Texas landowners can also get information and support from the Prescribed Burn Alliance of Texas (<http://pbatexas.org>). The Alliance is comprised of "more than eleven Prescribed Burn Associations (PBA's) composed of educated and trained individuals in 121 Texas counties. The members work together as neighbors helping neighbors to reintroduce fire into the landscape to reduce hazardous fuel loads for public safety and to restore the ecological integrity of our natural lands." (from the PBAT Brochure). The PBAT and its associations works with multiple state and federal agencies such as:

Texas A&M AgriLife, Texas Parks and Wildlife, Texas A&M Forest Service and the US Department of Agriculture-Natural Resources Conservation Service. They also work with many non-profit organizations like: the South Texan's Property Rights Association, Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers, Texas Forestry Association and the Wild Turkey Federation. Their website has links to their mission, prescribed burning training opportunities as well as prescribed burning planning recommendations. Contacting your local Prescribed Burn Association would be an excellent resource for learning about the benefits of prescribed fire in your area.

Prescribe burning is an incredibly valuable land management tool. If applied appropriately, it can help you meet many of your land management goals. However, it takes education and experience to safely apply this tool to the landscape. Many of the Texas public land management agencies demonstrate yearly successful prescribed burning practices. Landowners in Texas are fortunate to have The Texas Department of Agriculture, Prescribed Burn Board and the Prescribed Burn Alliance of Texas to help educate and guide them in the use of this tool. ★

About the author: Jim Stockie graduated from Texas A & M University 1979. Jim is career U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service employee. Since 1991 he has been responsible for managing prescribed fire and fire suppression operations on multiple National Wildlife Refuges. He has used fire as a management tool on thousands of acres in 8 southern states from North Carolina, across the gulf to Texas. Currently he is responsible for managing prescribed burning and wildfire suppression operations on 135,000 acres located on five national wildlife refuges along the upper Texas coast and east Texas.

Burn professionals using drip-torches to conduct a field burn.

