



The two sides of fire: Wild vs. prescribed fire

The following column is the fifteenth in a series intended to benefit woodland owners.

As you are driving home one afternoon, you pass a large grass fire in a neighbor's field. The local fire department and a Department of Conservation crew are fighting the blaze. The next day you hear on the radio that the Department of Conservation is conducting a large prescribed burn on a nearby conservation area to restore a glade.

Confused? As ironic as it may seem, it is not unusual to find the same crew that was putting out a wildfire one day, lighting a prescribed fire the next.

Natural cover fires – fires occurring in vegetation – may be good or bad depending on the situation. Fires occurred naturally or were set by Native Americans for thousands of years and thus have been a major influence on Missouri's natural communities. Because these communities developed with fire, the use of fire may be required to maintain them. Prairies may be invaded by cedars or other woody vegetation, some plants may not be able to germinate and the composition of species in the forest may change.

On the other hand, fire is a powerful force that can destroy homes, damage property, cause injury and threaten lives. Used too often, or under the wrong conditions, it may damage rather than benefit natural resources. Fire can consume wood products, damage sensitive natural communities, initiate erosion and lead to siltation of streams.

Wildfires are fires that are unplanned and without any controls in place to limit their spread. Most wildfires in Missouri are caused by arson, escaped debris burns, equipment use and other human factors. Very few fires in Missouri are caused by lightning. Because they are not planned, wildfires often occur when fire danger

is at its highest and they are likely to do far more harm than good.

Prescribed fires are planned well in advance and have the necessary controls, equipment and personnel in place to contain them. Prescribed fires are conducted to achieve specific, pre-determined resource management goals and require a great deal of advance planning by trained personnel. Preparations must be made to insure control of the fire and it is ignited only when fuel and weather conditions are right to accomplish the goals of the burn.

The Department of Conservation has a long history of wildfire prevention and suppression. At the same time, we actively plan and conduct prescribed fires as a tool to help manage resources. Managers with prescribed fire qualifications identify natural communities where fire can be beneficial and prepare a specific burn plan for each area.

The ultimate goal of fire management is to insure that prescribed fires are conducted in a safe manner that achieves the desired management objective and that wildfires are controlled quickly and safely. Any wild or prescribed fire has the potential to damage resources or property if control efforts are not conducted properly.

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