

Fire can be useful for grassland management

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Fire provides numerous benefits in managing vegetation, said Nature Conservancy burn manager Jeremy Bailey at a prescribed burn workshop in Oconto.

Those benefits include controlling the spread of eastern red cedar in pastures, improving wildlife habitat, reducing hazardous fuels around homes and preventing catastrophic wildfires, or reducing damage from wildfires, Bailey said. Fire also stimulates renewal of native grass species.

The Great Plains evolved with fire, Bailey said. Woodlands would rapidly overtake grasslands without fire and certainly that's obvious in Nebraska where woody plants have invaded grasslands.

Bailey discussed a number of factors that affect the effectiveness and safety of controlled burning. He mentioned well-known factors like temperature, wind and humidity and also less obvious factors like topography. Fire runs uphill, he said, so canyons and narrow chutes and draws can affect fire behavior, as does time of day.

Cooler temperatures and moist air in the morning suppress fire, but as the sun warms the surface of the earth, grasses become more available to burn. Fire gives off radiant energy that nearby grasses absorb. Preheated and dried out, those grasses also become more burnable.

Bailey listed four steps for conducting a controlled burn. They include determining a specific objective or objectives for the fire. Second, the burn manager needs to map control lines. Then it's time to create those control lines by mowing fuel breaks, making disk lines or just planning on roads as control lines. Fourth, the crew should start a test fire on the downwind side of the unit, against a control line, so it can't readily escape. Finally, it's time to back the fire against the wind into the rest of the unit.

Click [here](#) for The Nature Conservancy manual on using fire as a tool for managing rangelands. The manual is available for download in several languages. Just click the language you want in the lower right corner of the page.

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