

Putting Fire to Work in Your Woodlands

By: Jennifer Evans, North Carolina State University

Lightning-caused wildfire is natural. It is part of the ecosystem. And it is inevitable. Careless use of fire and other human-caused factors can also cause wildfires any time of the year. As I was once taught about our woods, "It is not *if* they will burn, but *when* they will burn." Therefore, we need to prepare our woodlands for the inevitable. In the Summer VFLEP newsletter you read about how a Fire Safety Plan can help reduce the potential for wildfire damage on your land. But, did you know that some fires are in fact good and could actually mitigate the catastrophic damage that a wildfire could cause?

Prescribed burning, also known as controlled burning, is the deliberate use of fire by experienced practitioners under specified and controlled conditions to achieve a specific land management goal. It is a safe way to apply a natural process, ensure ecosystem health, and reduce wildfire risk.

Most wildfires that burn into areas where prescribed burning has recently occurred cause less damage and are easier to control. This is because the flammable plants and other fuels have already been reduced by previous fire. By safely reducing excessive amounts of duff, brush, and shrubs, prescribed burning is the most practical and cost-efficient way to reduce dangerous accumulations of combustible fuels under southern pine stands. It is one of the most effective tools that we have in preventing the dangers and spread of wildfires.

In addition to wildfire hazard reduction, prescribed fire can be used to reach other land management objectives, such as controlling hardwoods and other competing vegetation in pine stands. Shade-tolerant hardwoods of low value and poor quality often encroach upon the land that is best suited for growing pine. Unwanted species may crowd out or suppress pine seedlings. However, through the carefully planned use of prescribed fire, the understory can be managed to limit competition.

Since prescribed fire recycles nutrients back into the soil, encourages the new growth of native vegetation, and maintains many plant species that depend on periodic fire, it is also often used to improve forage and habitat for both game and non-game species. Other management objectives for which prescribed burning can assist include site preparation (some species, such as longleaf pine, actually need bare mineral soil cleared by fire in order to grow and germinate), enhancing appearance and access, and controlling insects and disease. The use of prescribed fire at the appropriate scale and frequency in your woodlands can ultimately help to increase the long-term value of your land, regardless of your management objectives.

Now that you know the benefits of prescribed burning, you may be wondering about the next step to start the process of bringing prescribed fire into your woodlands. In some states,



Sam Lindblom, The Nature Conservancy, explains the importance of understanding fuel levels and types before a prescribed burn. Photo by: Jennifer Gagnon, Virginia Tech.

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forestry agencies can help to install firebreaks, write a burn plan, conduct the burn, stand by on a burn that you are managing, or provide general assistance. However, if your burn must be conducted within a specific period of time, it is advised to check with them first because there may be a waitlist. Oftentimes, private contractors are also available for hire to complete these same activities. In Virginia, the Department of Forestry does not explicitly offer prescribed fire services; however, although you are responsible for your own due diligence in obtaining references before hiring, a list of available contractors can be found at this periodically-updated website:

<http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/quail/prescribed-burn-contractors.asp>.

If you would prefer to conduct a burn on your property yourself, it is recommended that you become a Certified Prescribed Burn Manager, at a minimum. In Virginia, the Department of Forestry has developed requirements to become a Certified Prescribed Burn Manager, which, for those new to burning, includes the successful completion of a three-day course and exam. The course is open to landowners, consultants, and anyone who would like to know more about burning. It includes sessions on the legal aspects of prescribed burning, fire behavior, tactics, smoke management, environmental effects, plan preparation, safety, and more. Certified Prescribed Burn Managers have an additional level of liability protection over those who are not certified if they adhere to the regulations within the Virginia Certified Prescribed Burning Manager Program Act.



A well-planned prescribed burn can help you achieve woodland management goals such as creating wildlife habitat, reducing fuel loads, and decreasing competing vegetation. Photos by: Jennifer Gagnon, Virginia Tech.

You can gain additional experience by assisting a neighbor with a burn, or by virtually watching a landowner conduct a burn as part of a free online course offered by North Carolina State University. The course, called e-FIRE, can be accessed here: <http://www.go.ncsu.edu/efire>. It allows participants to “see” how burns are conducted, and provides numerous videos and other resources to watch and read at your own pace. You can also exchange information, techniques, and experiences with other practitioners through your state’s Prescribed Fire Council. You can learn more about the Virginia

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Prescribed Fire Council and how to become a member by visiting their website:
<http://www.dof.virginia.gov/fire/vpfc.htm>.

Many landowners are concerned about the liability of conducting a prescribed burn. However, Virginia is considered a "negligence" state, which means that any landowner or his/her agent who conducts a prescribed burn in compliance with the law will not be held liable if smoke from the fire causes damage or injury, unless the damage results from negligence or improper conduct. There is no comparable liability protection for damages or injury resulting from an escaped fire in Virginia. Several insurance companies provide protection for prescribed burning, some even on a "per burn" basis for those landowners who may only burn once or twice each year.

Although prescribed burning is one of the most cost-effective tools available to manage your land, costs associated with a prescribed burn may still be a concern. Fortunately, there are several options available through various financial assistance programs such as those with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program to help offset the costs of conducting a burn. Payments for a prescribed burn through EQIP vary depending on the type of burn and whether you are considered to be historically underserved. Visit your local NRCS field office to learn more.

To learn more about how good fires can protect your forest, please visit
www.goodfires.org.

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