

Bluestem Breezes
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March – In Summary

Dry. Windy. Fires. Ok, well, so that makes for a short column!

Early in March, I suspected that prescribed pasture burns would begin early due to the earlier warm-ups. However, as the month progressed we experienced multiple windy days. And, the Spring rainfall we'd like to receive in March and April just hasn't quite happened. Consequently, we've now experienced some burning – some that was termed controlled and some that was not.

As of April 3rd, KDHE analysis estimated 37,000 acres had burned in Wabaunsee County (18,000 for Geary and 24,000 for Morris). One month ago, I predicted – based upon past trends – we would burn somewhere in the range of 140,000-150,000 acres in Wabaunsee County. Today, it's April 11th. Most of our prescribed burning is typically wrapped up within the next week. Are we going to burn 100,000 acres in a week? I have a feeling that the Sheriff, Emergency Manager, and certainly the Volunteer Fire Departments all gasped in unison at that thought! Rightfully so. I don't foresee 100,000 acres burning in 1 week without significant in the forecast.

But technically folks, those acres NEED the burn. Why? It's part of a range health plan. We still rely upon burning of the tallgrass prairie to preserve it. I've heard a number of times that we need to burn about 60% of the tallgrass prairie annually in order to maintain it. No, that doesn't include resurrecting any acres from the cedar trees; that is just to maintain what we have today.

To help give perspective, there are (according to USDA) 408,000 grassland acres in Wabaunsee County and 60% is in the neighborhood of 240,000 acres. Over the past 15 years, we only burned 172,000 acres annually. We haven't burned 60% of our acres in any one year since 2009. Sure, there are years of drought in there. Interestingly enough, in 2013 we only burned 23,000 acres.

One of my favorite quotes is "This story goin' somewhere!?" Alas, I digress.

It is dry. There is a large fuel load in these pastures from timely rains in 2015. The "suitable" days to burn this year are at a minimum, regardless of the early start in March.

To my friends in the ag industry, please burn with caution and skill. Our fire crews are volunteers. They have been called out too much this year already. With each request for Fire Department assistance, we take these guys away from their full-time work and their families.

And for the general public, a great majority of our ranchers owe much of their livelihood to the grass. A dear friend once said "Take care of the grass and the grass will take care of you". Our ranchers do not burn for entertainment, but rather for the sake of their operation. Most ranchers in the Flint Hills are dedicated to safe burns. If you see a prescribed burn, understand that there are multiple folks loaded down with the equipment necessary to conduct the burn in a controlled manner. There may be lots of burning during the coming week as folks attempt to conduct many burns in the short window remaining. Or, the weather may stay dry and you'll see few fires. Mother Nature indeed plays its part.

We all need to remain cognizant of the Flint Hills Smoke Management Plan. It is in place, in part, to show our good faith efforts at committing to maintain air quality – for everyone. For more information on the Plan, please visit www.ksfire.org. And, before you conduct a prescribed burn, check out the website for recommended burning days and pertinent weather information.

Still, one of the best things we can do for our pastures is burn them under good management making quality decisions, ensuring sustainability of the pasture and the operation.

For additional information on prescribed burning or the Flint Hills Smoke Management Plan, visit the Extension Office (215 Kansas, Courthouse; kamayer@ksu.edu; 785-765-3821). For Bluestem Breezes archives, visit wabaunsee.ksu.edu.