

HORTICULTURE COLUMN

PRESCRIBED FIRES

According to Martha Monroe, Wildland Fire Education Coordinator for the University of Florida's School of Forest Resources and Conservation, we are approaching another severe wildfire season. So far this year, Florida has had 1339 wildfires burning a total of 38,156 acres. Several fires have exceeded 3000 acres in size. You have probably been following the stories in the media.

"So far, 80% of Florida's counties are at a Keetch-Byram Drought Index of 500 or higher," says Monroe. This is an index of 0-800 with 800 being severe drought. "While it is not uncommon for our sandy soils to dry out in some seasons, it is uncommon to head into the dry season with prolonged drought as we have experienced in the last six months."

The intensity of the Florida wildfires of 1998 has prompted a cooperative education effort including staff from the Florida Division of Forestry, University of Florida Cooperative Extension, local Emergency Management offices and The Nature Conservancy. Local efforts are underway to reduce damage from wildfires in Osceola County.

The Division of Forestry recently trained nearly 50 volunteer fire fighters in wild fire behavior and fire safety. Yesterday, local news reporters learned about the benefits of prescribed fire ,first hand, at Osceola's newest park, the Lake Lizzie Preserve, located near Bay Lake and Pine Grove Park east of St. Cloud. Workshops are planned in fire prone neighborhoods to help residents access their risk, reduce fire damage and landscape with fire in mind.

This week is Prescribed Fire Awareness Week. Frances Nevill, public relations specialist with the Nature Conservancy, shared the following information regarding prescribed fires at a recent training meeting. I thought you would find it interesting as we move into the danger zone..

"As Osceola County has developed and we no longer allow lightning fires to burn, fuels build up to dangerous levels," said Tom Donohoe of the Orlando district office of the Florida Division of Forestry. "For example, we've seen destructive wildfires in Florida over the last few decades because the forests haven't had regular fuel reduction. Florida's pine forests need prescribed fire every few years to maintain safe, reduced fuel levels."

One of the best methods for preventing future wildfires is prescribed fire. Prescribed fire is a supervised burning of vegetation based on a prescription that takes into consideration fuel type, fuel moisture, relative humidity, air temperature, wind speed, wind direction, and other atmospheric conditions to ensure a safe and successful burn. Prescribed fires are planned, set, and extinguished by trained professionals. All prescribed fires must meet set criteria to be authorized by the Florida Division of Forestry.

Prescribed fire is a land management tool used to restore and maintain fire-dependent ecosystems, enhance forest health, improve wildlife habitat, and prevent wildfire by reducing hazardous fuels. Fire promotes healthy ecosystems by clearing out competing vegetation, cycling nutrients into the soil, providing food for wildlife, and stimulating fire-dependent plants to grow and produce seed.

Concerns regarding smoke created by prescribed fire are a priority. Wind direction is tested before burning to ensure that smoke will blow away from nearby highways, schools, hospitals, neighborhoods, and other sensitive areas.

One of the greatest benefits of prescribed fire is that it reduces "fuels" the underbrush, branches, pine needles, leaves, and dead plant debris that have built up on the forest floor over time. If fuels are not reduced every few years, wildfires can become intense, hot, and destructive.

Because of Florida's long history of lightning fires, Osceola County's natural systems are adapted to fire and depend on periodic fire to remain healthy. Prescribed burning is a vital tool for managing pine flatwoods, pine sandhills, and sand pine/oak scrub all found in Osceola County.

The plants and animals of these natural communities are adapted to fire. These natural systems shelter many threatened and endangered plant and animal species that rely on fire to survive, such as the Florida black bear, the Florida scrub-jay, the indigo snake, the gopher tortoise, and the scrub holly. When fire is kept out of these areas, some plant and animal populations decline and eventually disappear.

Because natural fires can no longer move across the landscape as they did historically, prescribed fire at appropriate intervals is necessary to maintain these unique natural communities. For example, prescribed fire reduces the height of scrub vegetation to a level that is suitable for the Florida scrub jay and opens up sandy areas which allows the jays to store their acorns. Fire also generates fresh seeds, fruits, and native plant growth, providing food for these rare species.

Many people have expressed concern about the safety of wild animals during prescribed fires. Most wild animals migrate to safety during the relatively slow-moving prescribed fires. Some animals take refuge by moving to unburned or previously burned areas. Small animals seek shelter under logs, in old trees, and in burrows like those of the gopher tortoise.

"Few animals are killed by fire, especially during the growing season when it's warm and most animals are active," said Geoff Babb of The Nature Conservancy. "In most fires, there is only an occasional snake or box turtle casualty. Mammals are rarely killed, and ground nesting birds build new nests and benefit from increased numbers of insects after the fire."

Prescribed fire is also beneficial to the people of Florida. It prevents wildfires and provides improved wildlife habitat, forest, and grazing land. As Florida's population continues to grow, more and more areas will be developed that will require fire protection services. Prescribed fire is a safe and effective land management tool for preventing wildfires.

Contact the Cooperative Extension Office at (321) 697-3000 if you are interested in a Wildland Fire Safety Workshop in your area. Call the office for information on landscaping to reduce fire risk, wildlife and wildfires, benefits of prescribed burning and creating developments with fire in mind.

When considering Florida's population growth and the devastating impact of uncontrolled wildfires, prescribed burning is a prudent approach to the long-term protection of Florida's natural resources and Florida's citizens.

Eleanor Foerste
Natural Resources Agent
Osceola County Extension/University of Florida
1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane
Kissimmee, FL 34744
(321) 697-3000
Fax (321) 697-3010
efoe@osceola.org
osceola.ifas.ufl.edu
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