

WILDLIFE

Drought must be considered when applying prescribed fire

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Fire is a natural process to which plant communities in the Southern Great Plains have adapted. Drought, which in recent years has been a major issue in the

Southern Great Plains, is also a natural process to which these plant communities have adapted. During consultation with landowners interested in applying prescribed fire, a common and drought-related comment is often repeated: "I can't burn because I have no grass for fuel."

Applying prescribed fire under the proper conditions, but in the absence of an adequate fuel load, such as grass, is a wasted effort. Prescribed fire should be applied only when it will help accomplish goals. In the case of inadequate fuel loads due to drought, overgrazing or both, stocking rate and duration of grazing should be addressed to build fuel loads before considering the use of fire. When adequate fuel loads consisting of grass are present, careful consideration should be given to make sure that the goal accomplished by applying prescribed fire exceeds the need to graze the grass or that there is enough forage available for both burning and grazing.



This is especially true during drought, and there is a high probability that drought in the Southern Great Plains will be a regular occurrence for several more years (See *The "New Normal" – or was it?* www.noble.org/ag/pasture/new-normal by Chuck Coffey.)

If drought persists, landowners who have appropriately adjusted stocking rates can still apply prescribed fire to a portion of their property annually or periodically to accomplish goals. However, for cow/calf producers, it is usually not recommended to burn more than 25 percent of the available forage base in a growing season during drought or normal years. In addition, the burn

should be planned at least one year in advance to ensure an adequate grass fuel load. If drought prohibits burning that year, the plan is still good for the same location in the following year(s) when conditions are more favorable. Landowners who do not have livestock to graze have more flexibility with applying fire.

Other opportunities for applying prescribed fire may exist during drought that do not require consideration of livestock forage or grass fuel loads. Many wooded areas can be burned if adequate leaf litter is present. Oak leaf litter is the fuel source for prescribed fire in many wooded areas. Burning wooded areas is often ►

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an excellent way to improve habitat for many wildlife species and, over time, may also increase forage availability for livestock. Burning wooded areas using leaf litter as the fuel source is usually most effective from immediately after leaf drop until early spring. Burning before snow, ice or rain has moistened and compacted leaf litter is most efficient.

To provide landowners and professionals with recent fire science information and developments, The Samuel Roberts Noble Foundation and Oklahoma State University

Department of Natural Resource Ecology and Management will cohost a Summer Burn Workshop in conjunction with the Oklahoma Prescribed Fire Council annual meeting from 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., Wednesday, June 26, at the Marietta High School Auditorium located at 800 SW 4th Ave. in Marietta, Okla. Staff and faculty from the Noble Foundation and Oklahoma State University will give presentations on the benefits of prescribed fire, impacts of patch burning on parasites, use of fire to kill Eastern red-cedar, extreme sum-

mer fire and stocker cattle grazing behavior to patch burning. Following lunch, attendees will travel to the Noble Foundation D. Joyce Coffey Ranch for a tour of previous burn sites and witness a demonstration burn, weather permitting.

This workshop is aligned with the educational outreach objectives of the Oklahoma Prescribed Burn Association (OPBA), a newly formed statewide organization to educate the public and policymakers about the need to use prescribed fire and the safety of this management practice. ■