

Burning Issues

By Fletcher Scott

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Probably the first “tool” humans ever used was fire. From the earliest discoveries of human settlements on continents all over the earth, we see evidence of the use of fire for food, heat, and defense. Many papers have been written about the use of fire by these early cultures. Again today fire is used as a modern-day land management tool, but that has not always been the case.

Beginning around the 1890s with the establishment of the United States Forest Service under the guidance of Gifford Pinchot, fire was viewed as a destructive agent to American forests that needed to be eliminated. World War II posters depicting soldiers dressed as forest rangers were gradually replaced with pictures of “Bambi” on posters saying, “Fire Aids the Enemy.” These campaigns proved so effective that the Forest Service adopted “Smokey Bear” as a mascot. Signs with “Smokey” appeared everywhere declaring “Only YOU can prevent forest fires.”

Most Americans bought into this process, believing that *all* forest fires were destructive. Before I go any further, please understand that many out-of-control wildfires are certainly destructive; however, as with any tool used in a responsible way, fire can be useful. In fact, it cannot be duplicated; burning is the only way to achieve certain successional goals. By *successional*, I am referring to the various stages of growth in an ecological community over a period of time.

In the years following World War II, various private landowners and a few government agencies began to see the practical use of fire as a land management tool. Over time, the days of fire suppression were gradually replaced by the fire management techniques used today. Even some of the more reluctant government agencies are beginning to understand the role fire plays in the communities they are charged with managing.

Kent Hanby, a retired registered forester living in Dadeville, teaches Burn Management Certification courses at Auburn University. In cooperation with the Alabama Forestry Commission, Hanby has written a book entitled *Alabama Prescribed Burning Guide*, developed to help prescribed burn managers plan and safely conduct burns.

“Today we need to burn to provide the early succession growth stages required by many species of wildlife such as deer, turkey, and quail,” said Hanby. “Early Indians burned for a variety of reasons, such as keeping pathways clear to avoid being ambushed and to lure in wildlife. Modern-day landowners want to provide habitat for wildlife, too. So today, in order to achieve these goals, we need to learn how to burn confidently and competently.”

Earlier this year, Hanby conducted a prescribed burn on property owned by Bob Battistella near Camp Hill. The landowner’s plan is to burn several blocks of land over the next several years, encompassing 6 to 25 acres each. “I don’t plan on burning every block this year. I want to burn at least one block next February,” explained Battistella. “This would allow me to set up a burn cycle each year. That way I will have a bigger variation of successional growth stages for wildlife.”

Battistella, who is in the process of taking Hanby’s course and obtaining his burn certification, continued, “I also want to clean up ground clutter, kill off some sweetgum trees, and scarify seeds laying in the soil. Certain seeds won’t germinate unless they have been exposed to fire.”

The weather conditions Battistella looks for in order to burn are very specific. “I need the temperature to be in the 50s or 60s, relative humidity around 30 to 50 percent, and surface wind speed from 1 to 5 miles per hour. I want a wind out of the north to carry the smoke away from the county road. Fuel moisture



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must be between 6 and 9 percent.” He said, “It took about a month for these conditions to be in the desired range. We were scheduled to burn in February, but had to wait until March 8.”

Battistella also noted that deer and turkey are now coming into the areas that were burned off in the spring.

“Landowners have a legal right to burn their property,” Hanby explained. “In order to exercise this right, permits must be obtained and guidelines must be followed. A permit can be obtained from the Alabama Forestry Commission for any burn larger than one quarter of an acre. Any smaller area not requiring a permit must have a buffer or cleared area 25 feet around the burn. This is especially important in areas with houses or buildings nearby.”

Another landowner who frequently uses burning is Jerry Brown of Hackneyville. Brown burns for much the same reasons as Battistella. “Wildlife is greatly benefited by periodically burning areas that have become choked with undesirable species of plants such as sweetgum, poplars, and maple,” Brown said. “I have established a field of native warm season grasses that need periodic fires to help seeds germinate. Big bluestem, little bluestem, switch grass, and Indian grass all grow better with seasonal burning. These grasses provide excellent nesting and brooding cover for quail and turkeys. In fact, without fires, many species such as butterfly peas, partridge peas, and ragweed won’t reproduce very well. Even desirable plants, such as blackberry and sumac, need to be thinned by burning, because they can get too thick to be useful to most wildlife species.”

Brown has also established a stand of longleaf pines on a parcel of his property. “Longleaf pines evolved with fire. The needles of this tree are designed to protect the delicate bud that is enclosed. When exposed to fire, these needles singe and burn at a low temperature. By the time the needles are burned up, the fire has passed, leaving the growing tree unharmed,” he explained. “Fire also removes competing vegetation and allows light to reach the ground. This releases all kinds of forbs and legumes. Forbs are herbaceous (non-woody), broadleaf plants such as clovers, chicory, and sunflowers. Legumes are plants that make and store nitrogen, such as peas, beans, and nut grasses that provide beneficial food for wildlife.”

According to Brown, while wildlife can greatly benefit from the use of fire, when and how much should be burned depends

Immediately following a prescribed burn.



TREASURE Forest landowner Jerry Brown and AFC Clay County Ranger Nick Jordan keep a close watch on weather conditions during a prescribed burn.

on the overall objectives. “If you are primarily interested in timber management, then that type of burning can be prescribed. If your objectives are creating the best conditions for wildlife, then another type of burning can be used.” He continued, “Land kept in optimal wildlife condition is not necessarily pretty to the untrained eye. Scrubby trees, grassy openings, and even exposed soil are all vital components in wildlife habitat.”

Land use is constantly changing, and this often determines if fire can be used to enhance the ecology of a community. Still, for many acres of land, fire is the prescription of choice, not a destructive agent to be stamped out. 🌲

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A few months later, after fire has removed competing vegetation, light is allowed to reach the ground, releasing beneficial plants for wildlife.

