

Prescribed Fire for Healthy Forests

What is Prescribed Fire?

Prescribed burning is an important technique used by wildlife and forestry managers to stimulate the growth of grasses and forbs, set back the growth of small trees and shrubs, improve access, provide habitat for threatened and endangered species, enhance populations of fire-dependent plants and animals and reduce high fuel levels that can contribute to dangerous wildfires.

Who burns?

The Department of Natural Resources, Wildlife Resource Division along with The Nature Conservancy and the Georgia Forestry Commission partner up to conduct burns at various locations on state property. Also USFWS, USFS and many private landowners burn their land.

Where do prescribed fires take place?

Biologists, botanists, ecologists, foresters, and other professionals assess state properties for burning. Are there rare plants and animals present that require fire? How heavy are fuel loads? Would game species benefit from the increased browse following a burn? Many factors go into the decision to try a burn, and eventually a burn plan is drafted and approved by a review committee made up of other nongame wildlife biologists, game managers and foresters.

Why burn?

We burn to restore biodiversity and improve habitat for a number of species. We burn to reduce fuel loads and keep the forest healthy. Burning promotes a variety of native plants and animals, cycles nutrients back into the soil, helps eradicate some exotic species, and improves the aesthetics of a forest. Remember, it's not only forests! Approximately 1/3rd of Georgia's 155 endangered plant species are fire dependent. Burning is good for entire ecosystems; pitcherplant bogs, savannas, native grasslands, blackbelt prairies and Carolina bays – to name a few. Prescribed fire is a safe way to apply a natural process and to ensure ecosystem health by reducing the risk of wildfires. ... Much of the damage on private lands from last summer's wildfires in the Okefenokee area was due to fire suppression.

How are the burns conducted?

Highly trained teams work from an extensive burn plan which lays out critical information such as weather conditions including humidity, temperature, wind speed, safety considerations, and nearby smoke sensitive areas. A burn boss, someone thoroughly familiar with the burn unit and with considerable burning experience decides when to try the burn, assembles a crew, briefs them on the operation, and commands the prescribed fire. Some prescribed fires are very small, only requiring 2-3 people and minimal equipment, while others may require as many as two-dozen people, ATVs, wildland fire engines, and even helicopters.

When are burns done?

Burns are done throughout the year depending on objectives, primarily in the winter and spring.

Is there any danger to the public?

If the burns are done properly then there is generally no danger to the public. The burn units are carefully checked beforehand and factors such as the amount of smoke produced are monitored to minimize hazards to the public.

What happens to the wildlife?

Mortality to wildlife from a burn is extremely rare. Most species found in pyric communities have evolved good instincts to avoid a fire. At the first sign of smoke many reptiles and amphibians go underground. Bats often roost under leaves on the ground, and many fly up as the flames approach, sometimes taking the opportunity to forage on flushed insects. Other species such as raccoons, squirrels, and birds take to the trees, letting the fire pass below them. Larger animals such as deer move out of the unit ahead of the fire. When burning in the spring, occasionally bird nests can be lost, however many survive the fire and parents usually resume their care. Many studies have examined the effect of fire on nesting birds, and virtually all agree that the short-term loss from a burned nest is far outweighed by habitat improvements. In fact most of these birds would be lost from these sites in the absence of fire in just a few years due to habitat degradation. They need fire as much as the rest of the forest.

For more information on prescribed fire contact the DNR public affairs office at 770-918-6400

