

# THE CEDAR POST

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## FIRE

By Wesley Evans

Fire...the word can evoke feelings of warmth and comfort, but it can also cause fear and anxiety when thinking about fire on one's ranch/property. The unusually severe wildfire seasons in recent years and the resulting media coverage may lead some to believe that fire on the landscape is a harmful and destructive force, but that is not necessarily the case. Fire is a natural ecological process and was a factor in shaping the landscape of Texas prior to European settlement through lightning-caused wildfires or fire intentionally set by Native Americans. Also, Aldo Leopold, the father of wildlife management, recognized the beneficial role fire could play when he added it in his list of important tools for wildlife habitat management: "axe, plow, cow, fire, and gun". So how can fire be safely used by those looking to enhance their rangeland? The answer is prescribed burning. A prescribed burn can be defined as the thoughtful and skillful application of fire to a specific area under selected conditions to accomplish specific land management objectives. Some of the more common objectives are: increased food availability for wildlife, brush control, and wildfire mitigation.



Prescribed fire can be used to bring plant communities back to an earlier stage of plant succession, increasing both the quantity and quality of forage. Early successional stages have greater plant diversity and can be very beneficial to a variety of wildlife. Brush and other woody species can be top-killed by fire, causing them to resprout and bring browse back down where it can be utilized by white-tailed deer and other wildlife species. Grasses and forbs growing after a burn can have a higher nutritional content and be more palatable to both wildlife and livestock. Prescribed burning can be used at different times of the year to target specific plant species, either to promote desired species or to remove undesirables.

Prescribed burning is also an effective, low-cost alternative for brush control. Ashe juniper is not a fire-tolerant species and can be controlled with the use of prescribed fire. Burning a relatively large area with many small junipers can be cheaper and less time consuming than removing the trees by hand or with other mechanical means. Larger trees or thick "cedar brakes" can be managed by using fire in combination with other management practices. Likewise, prescribed fire can control prickly pear when used in conjunction with herbicide or grazing.

Another objective of prescribed fire is to reduce the risk of potential damage caused by wildfires. Areas with a high probability of wildfire occurrence can be burned prior to wildfire season to remove or reduce the vegetation that could potentially burn during a wildfire. Wildfires burning in these previously burned areas will be of less severity and more easily controlled. Sensitive areas (endangered species habitat, riparian areas, buildings, etc.) can also have the risk of damage from wildfires reduced with the application of fire under prescribed, and therefore less volatile conditions.

It should be noted that prescribed fire is not a "one-time use" tool. Burning every 3-10 years (depending on objectives) will be needed to maintain the benefits gained by burning. It's also not a "magic bullet" to be used to fix any and all wildlife management issues; rather, it is just one tool in

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*FIRE...cont.*

the manager's toolbox that is best used in conjunction with other tools in order to achieve the maximum benefit. While fire is a great practice for wildlife and range management and can be a low-cost alternative to other tools, it also involves a much higher risk and potentially severe negative impacts if not used in a thoughtful and skillful manner.

So where can a landowner interested in prescribed fire go for more information and assistance? Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) can assist landowners interested in using fire as a tool to manage their habitat. The TPWD Wildlife Division provides technical guidance through all aspects of prescribed burning: planning, burn operations, and post-burn monitoring. The Division has four Regional Fire Coordinators statewide who are tasked with facilitating the implementation of prescribed fire on both state-owned and private lands. For more information on how TPWD can assist with prescribed burning, please contact your local County Biologist or Regional Fire Coordinator.



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