

Facts about Fire in the Native Landscape: Part II

Questions from FNPS members with answers by
Andrea N. Christman, Ecologist with the Division of Forestry;
Steven "Torch" Miller, Director, Division of Land Management, St. Johns River Water Management District;
& Maria Minno, FNPS Communications Chair

NOTE: This is a continuation of a question and answer series which began in the Winter 98-99 issue of *The Palmetto*, Vol. 18, No. 4. Due to limited space, the series will continue in the next issue of *The Palmetto*, with additional questions about specific plants. To learn more about Florida's fire ecology, come to the conference! See pages 11 and 12 for the many programs planned on fire topics.

QUESTION: What exactly is controlled burning and where is it needed? Who does it?

Land managers use the term prescribed burning, defined by Florida Statute Chapter 590.026 (3)(a) as follows: "Prescribed burning means the controlled application of fire to naturally occurring vegetative fuels under specified environmental conditions and following appropriate precautionary measures, which cause the fire to be confined to a predetermined area and accomplish the planned land management objectives."

CHRISTMAN: Prescribed fire is needed, and applied for a variety of reasons ranging from land clearing for development, site preparation prior to tree planting, stimulation of range for cattle grazing, reduction of accumulated woody and vegetative fuels in natural areas and near residential areas, and maintenance of natural plant and animal communities in Florida and other states.

As a tool, prescribed fire is used by persons in both the public and private sectors with various levels of training. While no technical training is required for persons involved in agricultural or land clearing burns, all other prescribed fires are permitted only when a certified prescribed burn manager is present. A certified prescribed burn manager is an individual who has successfully completed the certification program of the Florida Division of Forestry (at minimum an eight-hour course). Prescribed burns are completed by private land owners, developers, public land managers, and others.

All authorized prescribed fires conducted under the provisions of Florida Statute Chapter 590.026(5)(a) are tracked daily by the Division of Forestry and require a written prescription which evaluates fuels, weather, smoke sensitive areas, and adjacent property owners. Prescribed burns must be considered to be in the public interest and are considered a property right of the property owner.

MILLER: Nineteen of the 42 terrestrial and palustrine natural communities of Florida are dependent on fire for their continued existence. Of those nineteen communities, twelve are identified as rare, imperiled, or critically imperiled. Without fire, these natural communities will be lost, including all the plants and animals that exist within those communities. A hundred years ago, lightning and the Native Americans ignited sufficient fires to maintain these communities. Florida has developed to the point where fire can no longer

be allowed to run its natural course to maintain the environment. Prescribed burning is the only opportunity to insure that the communities dependent upon fire are maintained.

QUESTION: What if someone owns land that has on it the type of natural communities that evolved with fire – should they burn their land? Where do they go for assistance?

CHRISTMAN: If a private landowner is interested in maintaining or restoring fire-dependent communities on their property, the use of prescribed fire is a very good option. The viability of fire as a tool on each site will be determined by a variety of factors, including the location and size of the property, the changes in the natural community due to fire suppression, and local awareness of and education about prescribed fire as a management tool.

The field offices of the Division of Forestry can be contracted to complete prescribed burns for private landowners, and in some areas, private contractors may also be available.

A public workshop on prescribed fire will be conducted in each county in Florida during the year, covering such topics as benefits of prescribed fire, training requirements, burn authorization process, safety precautions, facts and fiction regarding open burning, and landowners burning assistance.

Contact your local Division of Forestry office for information on available prescribed burning services and training.

MILLER: If they desire to maintain the natural community, it is necessary to apply fire. This may not be possible in all locations, however. Some municipalities and even counties have either restricted or attempted to restrict burning.

MINNO: In some areas there are private individuals and organizations that can do prescribed burning on small parcels, even within city limits. Landowners will find that vegetation is much healthier and more beautiful if they do burn their land.

QUESTION: If we allow controlled burning in our neighborhood, what are the dangers and what will it be like?

CHRISTMAN: A properly conducted controlled burn should pose no long-term threat to your neighborhood. The Division of Forestry and other land management agencies regularly conduct prescribed burns adjacent to residential areas. There are short-term impacts,

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such as smoke in the neighborhood on the burn day, active flames may be visible, and the blackened appearance of the burned area may not aesthetically pleasing to some, but these factors dissipate over time. The benefits, such as reduced fuel load for wildfire, increased abundance of wildflowers, and improvement of wildlife habitat, will become obvious over time.

MILLER: Before the burn, firelines will be established. This may be a mowed line, a plowed or disked line, or it may be existing roads and trails reinforced with water. These lines are used to keep the fire in the designated area.


During the day of the burn, there will be heavy equipment on site. This may be noisy. Smoke

and ash will be in the area, though burns are planned to minimize smoke impact and to direct the smoke away from people and highways. Flames may be visible from residences.

After the burn, stumps and duff pockets may continue to smoke for a few days. Within a week, grasses and wildflowers will begin to sprout and the area will be renewed with succulent vegetation and wildlife interested in eating the new growth and minerals in the ash. Within six months, it will be difficult to see that the area burned.

Every effort is made to minimize the risk of the fire getting out of the designated area. Lines are established, weather conditions needed are specific and monitored as the fire proceeds,

and staff and equipment are on site to actively control and manage the fire. However, fire is part of nature and therefore always has the ability to do the unexpected; winds can shift or embers can light fire outside the line. Fire staff are trained and equipped to deal with unexpected conditions. Thousands of prescribed burns are completed each year and fewer than 2% escape control lines. Those that do escape are usually caught before they damage structures.

MINNO: Neighborhoods that use prescribed fire become a safer place to live overall. They also become more beautiful and ecologically sound. 

Learn more in the next issue of *The Palmetto*, in which the series, "Facts about Fire," will continue.