

Looking out my office window on a wet foggy morning sure doesn't get me in the mood to start thinking about spring burning, but the calendar shows that it is about time. One of the projects that was started last year on the Bressner Pasture, west of Yates Center, and will continue for the next four years, is an early burn (March) compared to the normal burn (April) on native grass pastures.

Years of research has shown that the best time to burn native grass pastures in southeastern Kansas is around the second week of April. However, if everyone burns at the same time, it does cause a smoke management problem for some of the larger cities in our area, and that may cause a problem for all burning.

Late-spring burning effectively controls eastern red cedar, buckbush, and most other undesirable woody plants except smooth sumac. It also improves grazing distribution, because livestock seek vegetation that develops after a fire in preference to vegetation that was heavily grazed the previous season and doesn't burn because of insufficient fuel to carry a fire.

There are several guidelines to follow before you burn. Here in Woodson County we are required to have a burn permit, issued by the sheriff's office. Prior to lighting a fire, we must notify the sheriff's office of where and when we plan to burn. We also notify sheriff's office once the fire is out. It is important to work with your neighbors and if possible burn together. Monitor weather reports for several days and especially wind direction and velocity the day you want to burn. Sometimes waiting a few days for the wind to change directions can save a lot of time and work in setting back fires.

A common mistake is to burn when it is calm, but a steady wind blowing in the direction you want the fire to move is vital to the success of a controlled burn. If smoke might present a traffic hazard, notify the proper law-enforcement agencies. Make sure you have plenty of help and good equipment.

If you are wanting to improve cattle gains, a controlled burn at the correct time can add several pounds of gain per head. A 17-year study in Flint Hill Bluestem range near Manhattan showed 233 pounds on an un-burned pasture; 237 pounds on a March 20th burn date; 251 pounds on a April 10th burn date; and 259 pounds on a May 1st burn date. This was using yearling steers stocked from May 1 to October 1 from 1950-1967. That does not tell you what will happen in Southeast Kansas, but the first year study on Bressner Pasture on double-stocked steers was about 20 pounds more gain on the April 15 burn compared to the March 20, 2019 burn date. Hopefully I can plan to burn the north half of the Bressner Pastures in the second week of March if weather cooperates. So if you are driving west of Yates Center and see smoke south of 54 Highway early in March, rest assured we are burning for a research trial, because we truly know we are hurting cattle gains by burning native grass this early.

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