



Planned burn may lead to plant revival

BY MARSHA L. MELNICHAK Northwest Arkansas Times

Posted on Thursday, February 28, 2008

URL: <http://www.nwanews.com/nwat/News/62643/>

Fayetteville and Farmington area residents can expect to see white smoke and 10-foot flames for about half an hour today north of the new wastewater treatment plant on Broyles Road.

“ Should be able to see it all over Fayetteville, ” said Bill McKinney, the man in charge of the controlled burn that is intended to help restore native prairie plants and rare birds to the wetlands area while ridding it of fescue.

“ It’s going to go real quick. Thirty minutes, it’ll be over, ” he said.

McKinney, the fire management officer for Wildland Inc., is retired from the U. S. Forest Service and has been conducting burns for about 30 years.

Wildland will conduct a prescribed burn on the wetland mitigation site, the Woolsey Wet Prairie Sanctuary, north of the new westside wastewater treatment plant, today, probably in the afternoon.

“ Basically it’s a flash fire, ” McKinney said. “ It’ll be over with pretty quick. I’ve got to get the fire to burn hot. Instead of just a little creeping burn, I’ve got to have this fire burn with at least 8- to 10-foot flame lengths.

“ We have to build a pretty good heat to get rid of the fescue. ”

Timing of the burn is dictated by nature, including the weather and the state of the vegetation.

“ We’ve been watching for a long time to get just the right moisture content, wind down, weather right, and also simultaneously the vegetation correct, ” said David Jurgens, Fayetteville water and sewer director.

Exact timing within the day is also dictated by weather.

“ They’re going to go based off the situation at the moment, ” Jurgens explained.

“ It’ll be in the afternoon, ” McKinney said. “ I have to let the humidity drop. I want the humidities to be down in the 30 s. If the humidity gets above the 40 percent, I won’t burn it, and if I have high winds, I won’t burn. ”

If the burning does not occur today, the next burn window is “ probably next week, ” he said.

The 28-acre burn area lies roughly west of Broyles Road, east of 54 th Street, south of Persimmon Street and immediately north of the wastewater plant.

Fayetteville and Farmington fire departments have been notified and will be on standby to assist “ should any of the fire escape the bounds of the mitigation site, ” according to a press release issued Wednesday afternoon.

Tony Johnson, Fayetteville fire chief, described standby as a state of heightened awareness. Firefighters will not be at the site but will be ready to go.

Preparations for the fire included mowing a fire containment line around two or three sides of the area, McKinney said.

Bruce Shackleford, the city’s environmental consultant for the wastewater treatment plant, said controlled burning is a well-accepted vegetation management tool.

“ What we are doing is restoring a remnant of the past, this remnant prairie, ” said Shackleford, who said it was originally a tall grass wet prairie.

Maintaining a wetland habitat is a requirement by the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers for the wastewater project to offset wetland losses during construction of the west-side wastewater plant, he explained.

Before May 2006, the wetlands mitigation site had been heavily grazed by cattle and hayed. Since then, the city has built berms and changed the water patterns on the land.

When originally counted, the site had 47 plant species. With the removal of the grazing pressure — and the cows — plant species are returning.

At last count, it had 278 species, Shackleford said.

“ Unfortunately, what is also happening, fescue is trying to take over our site, ” he said.

Shackleford said seven rare plant species that were never previously recorded in Washington County have been identified at the wetlands site. They are mainly wetlands sedge plants.

“ They’ve been there all along, and now that stress factors and environmental conditions are changed, they’re popping up, ” he said.

He said some of the native seeds can remain dormant for 50 years or more. They require fire or sunlight to germinate.

Recent cold weather has killed the fescue “ back to the point that it will create a lot of natural fuel, ” Shackleford explained. The fire today is to burn the dead fescue and

decaying thatch material to expose the native seeds to sunlight.

About three weeks after the fire, the fescue, being a cool season grass, will be the first plant to come back. At that critical time, a low-impact herbicide will be applied to kill the fescue.

“ All the good native stuff will essentially be asleep, but the fescue will be green, ” said Shackelford, who explained that plants have to be green and growing for the herbicide to affect them.

“ We can spray the herbicide without harming the desirable plants, and that will certainly give the native plant species a jump start, ” he said.

He estimates seeing up to 30 more plant species at the next plant inventory in the spring.

Birds, too, are responding to the change in the wetlands.

Rare birds, like the shorteared owl, a prairie species, have been seen on the site, along with mallards, geese and teal ducks, which use the marshes. Greater yellowlegs and Wilson's snipes, whose populations are declining because of the lack of grasslands, have also been seen.

Copyright © 2001-2008 Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, Inc. All rights reserved.
Contact: webmaster@nwanews.com