

WILDLIFE & FISHERIES
by *Mike Porter*
e-mail mdporter@noble.org



Pros and Cons of Burning (Revised)

Fire can be a wonderfully useful and flexible land management tool. So why don't more people use it? Why do so many people think fire is generally bad? Probably because they have not taken the time to study *prescribed* burning and the ecology of their natural resources. Fire is as natural as rain and sunshine. It was always a part of the natural ecology of our landscape.

Unquestionably, fire has the potential to cause great harm. It can destroy our houses, barns, fences, vehicles, forages, crops, timber or other property. It can kill and maim people and other animals. It can accentuate the effect of drought by destroying the mulch on the soil. It can be a substantial liability risk.

So why burn? Fire can be used to alter plant species composition to favor more desirable plants, e.g., it can be used for controlling annual weeds, increasing legumes, reducing hardwoods in pine timber, reducing woody plants in grassy areas, controlling cedars, etc. It can be used to improve palatability, quality or availability of several forages for livestock and wildlife; thus, it can be used to manage livestock grazing distribution, improve deer habitat, improve quail habitat, etc.

Used properly, the harmful effects of fire can be avoided. Used improperly, fire may not only cause the harmful effects mentioned above, it can also cause the opposite effects of the benefits listed. Obtaining desirable results with burning is not as simple as striking a match. Whether fire helps or hurts depends upon how, when, where and why it is used. Careful planning and a fairly thorough understanding of soil, plant and animal ecology are necessary to obtain consistent benefits from burning. To expand one's knowledge regarding beneficial uses of fire, a person can contact a wildlife and fisheries specialist or forage specialist at the Noble Foundation or a range specialist with Oklahoma Cooperative Extension or USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.