

WILDLIFE

Education, experience produces successful burn bosses

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Fire is an important process in the ecology of most native plant and animal communities, especially in uplands. Most plant and animal communities

in the Great Plains and eastern forests evolved with fire. In many situations, land managers can use prescribed fire to manage native plant communities, wildlife habitat, woody encroachment, forage quality and wildfire risks. Unfortunately, many land managers cite lack of experience and labor as reasons not to use fire when managing their properties.

Land managers interested in implementing a prescribed burn could begin their education by reading materials in print or online from entities skilled in prescribed fire training. Beginning prescribed burn users should further their education by attending prescribed burning workshops such as the ones hosted by the Noble Foundation in January and July or by state wildlife departments, cooperative extension services (Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension, etc.), Natural Resources Conservation Service, prescribed burn associations such as the Oklahoma Prescribed



Burn Association (www.ok-pba.org), and other entities. Workshop attendees typically learn the basics of prescribed burning, such as setting goals, impacts of burning, firebreak types, fuel load management, smoke management, equipment and labor requirements, laws and regulations, fire types, etc.

After attending a workshop, beginning prescribed burn users should assist one or more experienced burn bosses with several burns prior to conducting his/her first prescribed burn. To locate an experienced burn

boss, visit with one of the prescribed burning training entities mentioned above.

An experienced burn boss is necessary to safely and effectively coordinate a burn. This person is in charge of all aspects of the burn. A qualified burn boss is someone who has been part of dozens of burns and has served in a variety of roles. The burn boss is familiar with all aspects of the prescribed fire (firebreak preparation, appropriate weather conditions during and after the burn, equipment required and used, area being ►

burned, areas of concern, etc.) and is responsible for deciding whether to burn or not.

I have participated in roughly 100 prescribed burns in the past 15 years and have served as the burn boss for approximately 25 of them. I followed the process described above to become a prescribed burn boss. I attended several courses/workshops and assisted several different burn bosses. From personal experience, I

can assure you that participating as an active crew member during a prescribed burn is an invaluable experience. Before serving as a burn boss for the first time, I assisted as a crew member on approximately 10 burns and preformed all crew member positions. There is a noticeable difference in the level of responsibility between a crew member and the burn boss.

Admittedly, I was very nervous the first time I served as the burn boss. I

was responsible for the safety of my crew and for completing the burn. After serving as a burn boss, I now have a greater appreciation for good firebreaks, well-maintained equipment and a good crew.

Anyone can become a burn boss with time and patience. Once the burn is finished, there is a great sense of accomplishment knowing you planned, prepared and safely completed it well. ■