

Wildlife Refuge Public Prescribed Burn

Written by Ashleigh Balog

Monday, 13 April 2015 23:46 - Last Updated Monday, 20 April 2015 00:23



On Friday, April 10th, the Wildlife Refuge allowed its first public demonstration of a prescribed burn. Fire Management Officer Jason Riggins said that when they do a prescribed burn the two biggest questions they get from the public are: “why are you burning?” and “how do you burn?”

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The Wildlife Refuge is hoping that by hosting this demonstration, and more in the future, they can increase public education of their prescribed burns.

The demonstration started in the Visitor's Center where participants were given a field briefing by Burn Boss Jeremiah Phillips, resembling what the fire crew normally receives beforehand. The participants then went to the site where the fire crew planned to clear 35 acres of land.

Wildlife Biologist Daniel McDonald explained that by burning areas of dead grass it allows newer, greener grass to grow. This new grass is rich in nutrients that are absent in the dead grass. Burning also helps the Refuge to practice rotational grazing. By moving established herds to newer fields it prevents the land from being over grazed.

When the burning began, participants were allowed to stay up close to the fire while Phillips explained the technique behind their burns. The crew starts by using drip torches to establish a perimeter of the land to be burned. This perimeter acts as a buffer to prevent the fire from getting out of control. The crew then uses a practice called backfiring, where the fire moves back against the wind, caught between the burnt and unburnt ground.

The fire crew clearly explained the difference between a prescribed burn and control burns. Control burns are the backyard burns when people need to get rid of refuse. Prescribed burns are much more planned and detailed. The Refuge creates an annual prescribed burn plan and a 5 year fire management plan, and they only burn every 3-8 years.

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Present at this public demonstration were students from Southwestern Oklahoma State University's Wildland Fire Ecology class. Two of the students were allowed to join the fire crew during the burn. There were also members from Friends of the Wichita's, Big Pasture Prescribed Burning Association, and Comanche County Emergency Management. The Refuge hopes to have another public demonstration in the future to continue their public education goals.