



Photo by Becca Britton

# Fighting Wildfire with Prescribed Fire

Article by SANDRA RIDEOUT-HANZAK

SANDRA RIDEOUT-HANZAK of the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute surveys a prescribed fire in Borden County.

WE'VE ALL HEARD THE PHRASE, "FIGHT FIRE WITH FIRE." But, have we really considered how we can use prescribed fire to prevent and mitigate wildfires?

Last year was quite a year for wildfires in Texas. According to the Texas Interagency Coordination Center (TICC), the 2011 wildfire season saw roughly 3.9 million acres burned in wildfires. Although land uses have changed in Texas over recent decades, creating more continuous fine fuel for wildfires, these wildfires were largely weather phenomena, and we'll have the same problem again any time a drought year follows a rainy year. That's a fairly common occurrence in Texas. So, what can we do to prevent this? Can we mitigate catastrophic wildfires with well-planned prescribed fires?

First, we must recognize the historic role and prevalence of wildfires in Texas ecosystems. Wildfires were natural and recurred commonly in Texas' landscapes from the Pineywoods to the Plains. Longleaf pine forests are thought to have experienced surface fires every 1 to 3 years, while semi-desert rangelands with lower fuel loads probably burned every 5 to 35 years. What we have seen in the past year is that Texas wild lands will burn when they get dry enough, even if we try our best to prevent wildfires. In fact,

some recent changes to the landscape have made some of our ecosystems more likely to ignite and carry large wildfires. We have had increases in exotic grasses that create higher fine fuels loads for fire, reductions in grazing with some lands being converted to recreation lands, and documented warming trends accompanied by more extremes

some of the best private land rights in the world. However, with these rights comes responsibility. We have done a better job of managing rangelands in recent years by reducing overgrazing. Converting lands to CRP has helped protect our precious soil and created more wildlife habitat. These are good things. But these and other land



Photo by Terry Hanzak

A PRESCRIBED FIRE set to improve quail habitat backing across rangeland.

in weather conditions. All these things create a favorable environment for wildfire. So, even though wildfires such as we had last year are weather-related, there are certainly other contributing factors that we may be able to manipulate.

Texas is largely private land, and we enjoy

management practices have contributed to excessive fine fuel in continuous patterns across more of the state than we have seen in decades. This contributes to more wildfires, bigger wildfires, and wildfires that are harder to contain and more dangerous to fight. According to the National Interagency



Fire Center (NIFC), of the seven wild land firefighter deaths nationwide in 2011, four of them occurred in Texas. We can't expect federal, state, local and even volunteer firefighters to continue to risk their lives to protect our property from wildfire when we haven't been managing the fuels ourselves.

One the best tools for reducing fine fuel loads is prescribed fire. Prescribed fire also has added benefits by reintroducing a natural process to the landscape. It removes standing decadent range vegetation that is no longer palatable for grazers, making perennial grasses more palatable, nutritious and accessible. In the Pineywoods, it can be used to open up the midstory and increase sunlight reaching the forest floor, increasing diversity of understory plants. It also removes ladder fuels that contribute to crown fire creation. In both forests and rangelands, prescribed fire often creates a mosaic of wildlife habitats for increased wildlife diversity. With prescribed fires, we can remove fuel for wildfires under safer conditions.

If you've been considering prescribed fire as a management tool for your land, but you don't have the training or tools to conduct a burn yourself, you have several options. The first is to hire a trained professional to conduct the prescribed burn for you. You can find a list of state Certified Prescribed Burn Managers at the Texas Department of Agriculture website – [http://www.texasagriculture.gov/Portals/0/Reports/PIR/certified\\_prescribed\\_burn\\_managers.html](http://www.texasagriculture.gov/Portals/0/Reports/PIR/certified_prescribed_burn_managers.html).

Secondly, you could begin the process of becoming trained and certified to conduct prescribed burns yourself by taking a Certified and Insured Prescribed Burn Manager course. This course will give you an introduction to the science of prescribed fire and the steps one takes to conduct a safe and ef-

fective prescribed burn. You also need to take advantage of as many opportunities to gain burning experience, as possible. Work closely with an experienced burner to learn as much as you can until you feel comfortable conducting a prescribed fire yourself. One of the best ways for landowners to gain experience is by joining a local prescribed burn association. Associations assist members with training and use of prescribed

fire. Members participate in burns on land owned by other members and take advantage of pooled labor and other resources. You can learn more about prescribed burning associations in Texas at the Prescribed Fire Portal – <http://pbatexas.org/Default.aspx>.

Prescribed fires can't prevent all wildfires, but every acre burned safely is one less for wildfire. 🌿



Photo by Sandra Rideout-Hanzak

A STUDENT practices lighting with a drip torch.



Photo by Sandra Rideout-Hanzak

STUDENTS in Rideout-Hanzak's prescribed burning course practice lighting strip backfires.

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