

Prescribed Burning on Private Lands: Workshop for Southeast Texas Land Owners – Woodville Texas

On May 21, 2015, The National Park Service Big Thicket Preserve and the Texas Longleaf Taskforce hosted a workshop to promote and educate local landowners on prescribed burning. Topics included Texas laws on smoke and liability, benefits of prescribed burning, and cost share programs for landowners. Participants were able to meet and ask questions with representatives from State and Federal agencies such as Texas A&M Forest Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Texas Parks & Wildlife, National Park Service, and The Nature Conservancy.

The workshop began with a welcome from Fulton Jeansonne, Fire Management Officer with the National Park Service - Big Thicket Preserve, and Jennifer Evans, Coordinator of the Southeast Regional Partnership for Planning and Sustainability Prescribed Fire Working Group. The crowd swelled beyond pre-registration to a total of 140 participants, which included 67 landowners.

Kent Evans (Chair of the Texas Longleaf Taskforce and Coordinator for the Texas Longleaf Implementation Team) presented multiple benefits of prescribed burning, including fireproofing your timber portfolio, reducing understory competition, and stimulating vegetation diversity. He also gave reasons how Longleaf Pine can help reduce the risk of loss in your timber portfolio due to its resistance to southern pine beetle, wind throw, and fire mortality.

Evans offered the definition of prescribed burning as “the careful application of fire to vegetative fuels to improve wildlife habitats, livestock grazing and to cycle nutrients”. This workshop was designed to connect landowners with funding and technical assistance for burning. Ms. Evans suggested that landowners contact the Texas A&M Forest Service to find a list of vendors available to burn their land.

The following speaker was Andy McGrady from the Texas A&M Forest Service. His topic was wildfire prevention including the use of prescribed burning. McGrady is a Fuels Coordinator and is part of the Community Wildfire Protection Program. His goal is to educate and

protect communities against high risk from wildfires. Some specific concepts covered in his presentation were:

- His group administers a grant for prescribed burn cost assistance for lands within 10 miles of a National Forest Boundary.
- The program has limited funding and the priority will be to protect as many high-risk communities as possible.
- A main goal is to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire on private and public land.

The next presentation was by Attorney Larry Joe Doherty who explained Texas prescribed fire laws and landowner liability. Doherty leads a prescribed burn association and does much of his own land burning with this group. Some bullets from his presentation:

- Liability insurance is available to protect landowners and volunteers.
- Laws are changing to support the interest of prescribed burning.
- Prescribed Burn Associations members help each other with burning.
- He offered to help form a burn association in east Texas.

Landowner and attorney Mike Howard has been burning his Sabine County forest land for several years. His program “Why and How I Burn My Land, Why I chose Longleaf Pine” was presented by Rusty Wood, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. This presentation showed multiple aged stands of Longleaf that have been planted and burned several times by the Howard family. A few of Howard’s key points are as follows:

- Frequent burning benefits understory growth and helps control competition such as yaupon.
- Song bird response is being monitored on the Howard property and has documented benefits for Bachman’s sparrow, quail, buntings, turkey and other species.

Chris Gregory from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department spoke on how wildlife benefits from prescribed burning. Some key points that Gregory discussed:

- Periodic burns help to create and maintain useable space for ground nesting birds such as quail and turkey.

- Fire maintains and stimulates needed browse for deer.
- Burning promotes diverse habitats and wildlife species.
- Research has shown a dramatic increase in wildlife use of grass and forbs following a prescribed burn.

John Matel of the Texas A&M Forest Service gave the final presentation of the workshop. Matel and Joshua Johanson of the Natural Resources Conservation Service highlighted cost assistance programs for landowners who are interested in prescribed burning.

- The Texas A&M Forest Service helps to develop management plans, distribute information, and offer consultation.
- Local county appraisal offices have timberland tax exemptions as an incentive to keep timber.
- The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department has cost share programs such as the Landowner Incentive Program (LIP).
- Funding is also available through the NRCS EQIP program. Cost share for Longleaf restoration currently offers exceptional benefits through the “Longleaf Initiative” funding.

After the presentations landowners were provided an extended discussion moderated by D.W. Ivans of the National Park Service. Land owners queried a panel of experts including Natural Resources Conservation Service’s District Conservationist , Ronald Harris and NRCS State Forester, Mike Oliver, along with others about cost share programs and their use in managing private lands. A survey was conducted of workshop attendees, and the results showed that the percentage of landowners interested in prescribed burning rose from 47% to 70% as a result of the presentations.

Organizations assisting with the workshop included Natural Resources Conservation Service, Texas A&M Forest Service, The Nature Conservancy, National Park Service - Big Thicket Preserve, US Forest Service, Longleaf Alliance, Texas Longleaf Taskforce, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, North Carolina State University, and the Southern Fire Exchange.