

Prescription for a Burn

Palm Beach County takes prescribed burning seriously. The County follows established guidelines to ensure a successful outcome.

#1 - Burn Prescription

Before the first match is ever struck, a prescription is written outlining the environmental conditions necessary for a safe, effective burn. It spells out the time of year to conduct the burn, optimal weather conditions, size of burn unit, and the necessary equipment and personnel.

#2 - Pre-Planning

Prior to conducting a burn, County personnel survey the site to verify that firebreaks are clear and evacuation routes and safety zones are in place. Local residents and businesses are notified of the upcoming burn.

#3 - Execute Burn

Weather permitting, the County receives a burn permit from the Florida Division of Forestry. During the burn, crews continually monitor the fire to assure compliance with the burn prescription. Once complete, crews "mop up" any smoldering vegetation to prevent unwanted fire outbreaks and reduce smoke in the area.

#4 - Post Burn Monitoring

All prescribed burns are evaluated to determine their success in meeting the site's management goals.



A drip torch is used to start a prescribed burn

For more information on prescribed burning check out the following web sites:

Florida Division of Forestry
Forest Protection Bureau
flame.fl-dof.com

Large selection of prescribed burning topics, including a report on the ecological and economic consequences of the 1998 Florida wildfires.

Bureau of Land Management
www.blm.gov/education
Teacher resources section includes fire ecology activities for the classroom and "Burning Issues" interactive multimedia program.

South Florida Interagency
Wildland Fire Council
ice.prohosting.com/sfifmc
Provides information on the Florida Prescribed Fire Council and a fire training and resource link.

Firewise
www.firewise.org
Site for homeowners who live in fire-prone areas. Information provided assists individuals in reducing the risk of property damage from wildland fire.



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Palm Beach County Board of County Commissioners
3323 Belvedere Road, Building 502
West Palm Beach, FL 33406
(561) 233-2400

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The Spark of Life

The Role of Prescribed Burning in Managing the Natural Areas of Palm Beach County



Department of Environmental
Resources Management

A Land Shaped by Fire



The thought of fire as a beneficial force is hard to comprehend. Too often we see news reports detailing the devastating effects of uncontrollable wildfires - loss of property and life. Yet, in pre-settlement times, natural fires occurred regularly throughout Palm Beach County. These lightning-caused fires created open areas, reduced vegetation buildup, and returned nutrients to the soil. Fire-dependent plant and animal species flourished in this environment.

As Palm Beach County grew in population, urban development increased, and the frequency of wildfires decreased. The remaining natural areas began to change - open areas filled in, thick underbrush developed, and soil nutrient levels decreased. The populations of plants and animals dependent on fire for survival decreased, while homeowners faced the increased threat of more intense wildfires.

Fire had to be reintroduced in a safe way to maintain the health of these ecosystems. Because these areas were located in an urban landscape, the fires had to be tightly controlled. Enter the practice of prescribed burning. Prescribed burning is a technique by which land managers intentionally set fires in specific areas under very carefully controlled conditions to restore the natural benefits of fire to the land.

For the Health of the Environment

Today, the Palm Beach County Department of Environmental Resources Management is assisting Mother Nature with her fire duties. This is no easy task considering the County owns over 28,000 acres of fire-dependent natural areas. Prescribed burning offers numerous benefits to both people and wildlife.

Reduce Hazardous Fuel Loads

A buildup of dead and overcrowded vegetation can contribute to catastrophic wildfires. Prescribed burns clear out these fuels, resulting in future fires that are less intense and easier to control.

Improve Wildlife Habitat

Fire creates a varied landscape that provides habitat for plants and animals. Areas opened by fire allow sun-loving plants a chance to colonize new territory. These plants offer wildlife a wider variety of food sources, attracting more animal species to the area.

Facilitate Seed Germination

Several plant species require a fire to pass through prior to seeding. Many of these plants are considered "threatened" or "endangered" in Florida.

Manage Competing Vegetation

Fire "pushes back" or kills nonnative invasive plants that compete with native species for scarce nutrients.

Cycle Nutrients

As an area matures, a large proportion of nutrients is locked up in vegetation and unavailable until plants die and decompose. A prescribed fire speeds up the process, returning nutrients to the soil where they are again available to plants.

Public Safety

Burning under more predictable conditions allows managers to better direct smoke away from sensitive areas. Excess underbrush and other vegetative fuels are removed, keeping future fires smaller and slower - especially important to residential areas.

A Dependence on Fire

It may be hard to believe, but some residents of Palm Beach County depend on fire for their very existence. The Florida scrub-jay, gopher tortoise and sand pine are a few of the "native Floridians" whose lives are shaped by fire.



Photo by J. Stinz

The Florida scrub-jay, a threatened species, prefers to live in low-growing open scrub habitats. These open spaces allow the bird to bury acorns, creating a store of food during lean times. Periodic fires prevent vegetation

from closing these openings.

The gopher tortoise, a neighbor of the scrub jay, is listed as a species of special concern in Florida. The tortoise feeds on low-growing plants that require abundant sunlight to survive. Without fire, these plants would be shaded-out by taller plants, drastically reducing the amount of food available to the tortoise.



The sand pine, reaching an average height of 40 feet, lives in some of the harshest habitats of Palm Beach County. Like all pines, it reproduces by dispersing seeds from its pinecones. However, the sand pine has a closed cone that requires heat from a fire to open it so the seeds can drop to the ground.