

Kansas Flint Hills Smoke Management Plan: EPA's evaluation of plan's first year

The Kansas Flint Hills Smoke Management Plan is entering its second year in 2012. This comprehensive plan is designed to minimize the movement of concentrated smoke plumes into large metropolitan areas through voluntary participation. All Flint Hills landowners and managers who conduct prescribed burns should know what is in this plan.

To help educate all those affected, a series of radio interviews is being broadcast weekly each Monday on K-State's *Agriculture Today* talk show. These programs will explain the many aspects of the new plan. *Agriculture Today* is part of the K-State Radio Network. The broadcast interviews are podcast online at www.ksre.ksu.edu/news/DesktopDefault.aspx?tabid=66.

The following is a slightly edited transcript of the sixth in the 2012 series of *Agriculture Today* radio broadcasts on the Kansas Flint Hills Smoke Management Plan. This is an interview with Karl Brooks, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Region 7 Administrator, conducted by Eric Atkinson of the K-State Radio Network.

Q: When we look at the smoke management plan, how does the EPA view its effectiveness last year in its first season?

A: Our agency was very pleased with the way the plan worked in its first year. We thought that collaboration was the most important part of it. We are optimistic that smoke impacts will continue to drop. One of the best things that we were able to work out with a variety of stakeholders was a multi-pronged approach that really emphasized communication, education, and pollution dispersion. A good web site was developed – ksfire.org. That will help any landowner figure out what days would be good for burning.

Q: You have always been pleased with the cooperative spirit that led to this plan.

A: Very much so. The ranching community in the Flint Hills was really a co-architect on this plan. We also had very good working cooperation with the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE), as well as with K-State Research and Extension. That was one of the things that made the plan so successful. From our standpoint it was very encouraging that a lot of folks came to the table and contributed what they knew.

Q: What is your sense of the actual impacts of the plan on air quality in the first year of the plan?

A: The impacts this first year gave us the data we needed to assess how continual improvement will work. We laid down a baseline that first year. Everyone was getting familiar with the information. Landowners were becoming more aware of the information they could use to time their burn, and to spread out the burns over time and distance. Some of the readings we got indicate will still have some work to do. But we were fundamentally very pleased with how it worked.

Q: When you say there is some work left to do, what needs to happen to move this one step further?

A: I think probably the most important thing will be for landowners to use the tools and to advise EPA and KDHE, through Extension, how to improve these tools. This program will work when landowners use the best tools we can design. We think we will see the downwind smoke impacts

diminish from Flint Hills burning if we get the necessary information to the landowners because they have a very strong spirit of wanting to cooperate and be good neighbors with their city cousins downwind.

Q: Could you explain how EPA views any temporary spikes of smoke from concentrated grassland burning that might exceed the particulate limits in a metropolitan area?

A: One of the things that we are lucky about in EPA is that we have really good air modelers and scientists – the same with KDHE. Those kinds of specialists are looking at that data right now trying to determine what kinds of trends, if any, have been established. We're still early in that process. We know that KDHE has the authority right now to alert people downwind if they detect any really dangerous levels of pollutants in the air, and we assume KDHE would do that if such levels were to exist. We're still in the process of analysis and modeling right now, looking to make the plan better in 2012 and beyond.

Q: Could you explain the term “exceptional air quality event”?

A: The Clean Air Act sets the legal framework for our work at EPA. KDHE also has responsibilities under the Clean Air Act to protect air quality. There is a part of that Act that allows EPA and a state agency to recognize temporary spikes in air pollution as something that are so exceptional that those spikes do not need to be added into overall air quality during a period of years. One of the goals of this smoke management program is to set up the kind of analysis and education program that our two agencies, EPA and KDHE, need to make a finding of an exceptional event in the future. We're not there yet, but we had to get this first crucial foundation laid down.

Q: The plan then, in part, is a discovery process as much as anything.

A: Yes. As with every good process for making decisions about natural resources, we had to step back and figure out what we knew and what we needed to learn. Speaking for EPA Region 7, we needed to know much more about the role of fire in the Flint Hills. We needed to know more about what landowners were able to do, and were interested in doing. We needed to get a better feel for how we could work with K-State Research and Extension to get the information out that ranchers need and to get the data back that our agency needs.

Q: What is EPA's long-range view on prescribed burning as a grassland management tool as it relates to air quality?

A: Congress has directed EPA for more than 40 years to make sure the air we all breathe in Kansas and downwind of us is safe and healthy. That is our job. We recognize that burning in the Flint Hills has demonstrated long-range ecological benefits for the distinctive tall grass landscape. What we're attempting to do, and what we're optimistic we can do, is maintain that crucial role of fire for the ecosystem, and make sure that the landowner has that tool available for his cattle operation. But we also need to make sure the landowner uses that tool (fire) in a way that preserves air quality for the public health of millions of people downwind.

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