

Kansas Flint Hills Smoke Management Plan: The role of emergency personnel

The following is a slightly edited transcript of the seventh in a series of K-State's Agriculture Today radio broadcasts on the Kansas Flint Hills Smoke Management Plan. This is an interview with Jason Hartman, Kansas Forest Service, conducted by Eric Atkinson of the K-State Radio Network. Podcasts of all Agriculture Today interviews can be found at: <http://www.ksre.k-state.edu/DesktopDefault.aspx?tabid=197>

For complete information on the Kansas Flint Hills Smoke Management Plan, see the new website: www.ksfire.org/

Q: It has long been advised, and even mandated in some locations, that local authorities be notified of any grassland burning activity, both before and after the burn, is that right?

A: Several counties require, as a matter of county ordinance, that the dispatch center or fire chief be called to notify them of a prescribed burn. In those counties where it's not required, it's encouraged.

Q: That's beyond the smoke issue. It has to do with safety and notifying the public that a prescribed burn is underway, as opposed to a wildfire, correct?

A: Yes, especially in this era of cell phones. Smoke from a prairie burn can be visible from a great distance. So when a call from a cell phone comes in, if the dispatcher knows that a prescribed burn was planned in that area or at that address, they can avoid an unnecessary dispatch of emergency services to what is already a controlled situation.

Q: Now to the smoke management plan itself. What role do the local emergency authorities, such as sheriff's office or fire departments, have in this plan?

A: They will be among those who get the greatest number of questions from the public about what is going on, what is involved, what the idea is, what's voluntary, what's a regulation, and what's a restriction. So the local authorities need to be educated as much or more than any other entity about the smoke management plan.

Q: The agriculture side of this plan is voluntary, correct?

A: Yes, it is voluntary. The only way a voluntary effort can work is for as many people as possible to know about it and support it. If our local fire and emergency services personnel understand that and know how the plan works, they can help the local citizens support it and keep it voluntary.

Q: Authorities will be even more involved in the non-agricultural burning restrictions, correct?

A: For the month of April, the plan requests local authorities to enforce restrictions on any open burning other than for grassland management. So burning of any brush piles and things

like that would be restricted, and the burden of enforcing the restrictions falls on the local jurisdictions.

Q: Where will those restrictions be implemented?

A: The 13 Flint Hills counties, plus three urban counties: Johnson, Sedgwick, and Wyandotte.

Q: Local authorities are also collecting information on acreage that is being burned with prescribed burning. What is that aspect of the plan?

A: When you notify the local authorities that you're going to be doing a prescribed burn, one of the things they'll ask in most counties is how many acres will be burned. We initially went to nine counties (although this program is open and available to any county that wishes to participate) and asked the local authorities to enter the number of acres that was burned in their county at the end of the month in an online form. When we first started working on the smoke management plan, a question was raised asking how many grassland acres are burned with a prescribed burn every year. And no one really knew. This is an effort to get a better handle on that.

Q: So it is simply a matter of documentation?

A: Yes, this will allow us to ground truth other sources of information, such as satellite imagery. Also, with this monthly data, we can keep track of how many acres are burned in each county that participates each month. If we know how many acres were burned in March, for example, in a given county then we'd know how many more acres might be left to be burned in April. The more information we have, the better prepared we are in our planning.

Q: Theoretically, looking into the future, could this kind of information could be plugged into that decision-making tool that's being developed for smoke mitigation?

A: Yes. Those kind of decision-making tools will work better if they know how many acres are left to potentially be burned, and how much smoke could still be emitted into the air. There's no personal data being collected and reported. This is simply a county-wide effort.

Q: Part of the intent of the smoke management plan is to spread the burning out over a longer time period and reduce the intensity of the smoke from prescribed burns in the Flint Hills. How would that benefit local fire departments responding to wildfires?

A: Through education, information on the website www.ksfire.org, and other sources of information, we hope that people will find that there are possibly several different times that they could burn and still meet their objectives – brush control, prairie management, or livestock gain. Hopefully as people learn that, we can avoid having too much burning going on at any one time in any one area. In addition to causing air quality concerns at times, overly concentrated burning also stretches emergency response capabilities as thin as they can be stretched. If we can avoid those kind of situations, it makes everyone a little safer.

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