

Kansas Flint Hills Smoke Management Plan: What prompted its development?

The following is a transcript of the second in a series of K-State's Agriculture Today radio broadcasts on the Kansas Flint Hills Smoke Management Plan. This is an interview with Tom Gross, Bureau of Air, Kansas Department of Health and Environment, conducted by Eric Atkinson of the K-State Radio Network. Podcasts of all Agriculture Today interviews can be found at:

<http://www.ksre.ksu.edu/news/DesktopDefault.aspx?tabid=66>

Q: The process of developing the new Kansas Flint Hills Smoke Management Plan started with the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, which convened a smoke management advisory group. This group consisted of agricultural producers, government agency representatives, municipality officials, and K-State Research and Extension personnel, among others. That group came up with a plan that will be introduced this spring in the Flint Hills. What prompted the agency to pursue this smoke management plan.

A: The issue of Flint Hills burning impacting air quality is one that we've been working on with the agricultural community for a number of years. We first saw concerns about this in 2003. That was a year when we had a constricted burn season as a result of dry weather and some burn bans that were put into place. So there was quite a bit of burning done in just a small number of days. On those days, we saw impacts in Kansas City and in downwind cities several states away. That got us started, and we've met with agricultural representatives on this from 2003 to the present. We also had some occurrences in 2009 and 2010 when we saw exceedances of the ozone standards in both Kansas City and Wichita. So that's what prompted our development of the smoke management plan. The plan is important for the agency to get data flagged, or not counted, in evaluating whether a city or any community meets the ozone standards.

Q: As we go through this series, we will remind listeners and readers from time to time about the general components of the plan and its initial implementation on a pilot basis in 2011. Will you go over that?

Note: The 53-page Kansas Flint Hills Smoke Management Plan can be found at:

http://www.kdheks.gov/bar/air-monitor/flinthillsinfo/SMP_v10FINAL.pdf

A: The plan starts off with an introduction and talks about the same history mentioned above. Then it also has a component on the Flint Hills ecosystem – what's unique about the ecosystem and why it's important to preserve the tall grass prairie. It talks about the role that fire has played in the Flint Hills ecosystem, which is an important part of the plan. Then we get into air quality standards and a little bit of the history of what we've seen in regard to those standards, including the situations where we've had problems over the years and the reasons why we have a plan. Then Chapter 3 talks about some of the tools that are being made available to producers in order to make more informed decisions about whether the burning they're wanting to do on a certain day is going to have impacts downwind in cities such as Wichita or Kansas City. That chapter is the

heart of the plan. The rest of it is supplemental information leading up to that chapter. If people are going to read one chapter, Chapter 3 is the one to read.

We also have some discussions in Chapter 4 on restrictions on April burning. We want to make sure that non-agricultural burning that could occur sometime other than in April doesn't take place when the Flint Hills burning takes place. So we have some provisions that we're going to be putting into a new regulation regarding April restrictions. This will not affect prairie burning in the Flint Hills. It is non-agricultural burning that we're addressing with this regulation.

Q: That will apply to the 13 identified counties in the Flint Hills, plus some municipalities?

A: Yes. It applies to the core of the Flint Hills, and to Sedgwick, Johnson, and Wyandotte counties. This restriction is not done yet; we're working on that right now. We'll get a draft developed, then we'll share it with the folks who have a stake in that and get some feedback from them on the draft rule.

Q: One of the keystones to this program is the informational site that K-State is developing and will house. And of course all the stakeholders involved in creating the plan will be involved in contributing to that information as well. Could you talk about that?

A: Yes. The next chapter is on outreach and educations, and public notification. That is another critical chapter, probably as important as the other. It's important to know how to get this information out. We're working with K-State, which has taken a lead on this in developing a web site that includes the tools available to producers. We're also going to try to get the word out in a number of different ways, with some of the farm organizations and their own web sites, newsletters, on the KDHE web site, on-the-ground training that takes place with K-State Extension, and by NRCS. Those folks are all involved in this and will be getting the message out on what's in the plan and particularly Chapter 3 where we talk about some of the ways producers can make a more informed decision.

Q: The intent is to introduce this whole apparatus in two Flint Hills counties, Chase and Greenwood, in 2011 and see where it goes. But it is voluntary, right?

A: The plan itself, and the materials, we hope to introduce to everybody. We are having a more focused effort in the two counties you mentioned. We're going to try to work with producers in those counties and try to get them to use a fire checklist they can go through to make sure they've touched all the bases in gathering all the needed information. But the same materials are going to be available to everybody and we're going to reach out to everybody. We're just going to have a more focused effort in Chase and Greenwood counties in 2011.

Q: You are really encouraging feedback from producers, land owners, grassland managers, and anybody conducting a prescribed burn upon implementation of this plan in 2011, correct?

A: Yes, we want to know if this is working. There are a couple of ways we can judge that. One is through air quality monitoring through the month of April. Are we seeing improvement there. But just as important is to know whether the materials that are being developed now are useful in their current format. Are they understandable and helpful in making those burn decisions? If they're not and they need to be improved, then we ask for feedback from the producers so that going into the 2012 burn season we can make improvements.

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