

Kansas Flint Hills Smoke Management Plan: The grassland manager's perspective

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 second in the 2012 series of *Agriculture Today* radio broadcasts on the Kansas Flint Hills Smoke Management Plan. This is an interview with Mike Holder, Agricultural Agent, Flint Hills Research and Extension district office, conducted by Eric Atkinson of the K-State Radio Network.

Q: Take us back to the origins of the plan from your perspective and how it came together last year.

A: The original reason for the plan goes back to the occasional occurrences of ozone exceedances in urban areas over the past 10 years, which have been linked to smoke from our Flint Hills burning. Over the course of time, K-State Research Extension and grassland managers worked with KDHE and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency worked together to develop the smoke management plan to reduce these occurrences and yet ensure our ability to burn rangeland annually as needed. Everybody was a little apprehensive in its first year last year as to how this was going to work. But we were optimistic that it would work, and it did. It worked well. We had generally very good acceptance among ranchers. They understood why we need a smoke management plan and how important air quality is in urban areas, and to all of us. The ranchers jumped into it very enthusiastically for the most part.

Q: After last year's burn season was over, were you able to do some followup with producers about the smoke management plan and the web site that provides vital information on the timing of the burn?

A: Yes we were. Doing an evaluation was an important part of the smoke management plan. Carol Blocksome, K-State Research and Extension Research Assistant Professor of Agronomy, headed up that evaluation. Everyone who was part of the followup evaluation knew about the ksfire.org website, and about the smoke management plan. They understood the why and the how, and what we have to do. So from that standpoint, I look at our efforts to implement the plan as being very successful. As to how the ranchers utilized all that information, it varied quite a bit. But I felt good about the fact that a lot of ranchers went to the web site and used the weather and smoke management information. Some of them, not all of them, used that information to make burning decisions and some may have altered some of their burning plans as a result.

Q: There were a few days last spring when the smoke got pretty intense. Some of that had to do with the extraordinarily heavy fuel load left over from the previous year. That's not always going to be the case, is it?

A: That's correct. Going back to the grazing season of 2010, we had a lot of rainfall and good grazing conditions. We had a lot of grass and a lot of residue that carried through over the winter. So when it came time to burn in 2011, we had a heavy fuel load. When that happens, we burn a lot of acres. In Chase County, more than 80 percent of our native grass acres was burned last spring. With the heavy fuel load and the limited number of days that burning was possible, we expected there would be some days when there would be a lot of smoke in the air and the potential for some air quality problems in the urban areas -- and there was. This spring, the fuel load will not be as heavy so I think we'll burn a lot fewer acres. Hopefully we'll have fewer exceedances. But we'll still have the smoke management plan, and we'll still follow it.

Q: So although the plan was a success last year, this is not a time for ranches to rest on their laurels. They need to continue utilizing this information, correct?

A: That's correct. Burning of the Flint Hills is not just a good practice. It is an absolute necessity to maintain the integrity and productivity of grasslands in the Flint Hills. So we have to make a commitment to follow the smoke management plan, and do whatever we can to make it work for everyone.

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