

Prescribed Fire

benefits wildlife and people



Florida Fish and Wildlife
Conservation Commission

MyFWC.com

Prescribed burning keeps our wildlands healthy

Naturally occurring fires caused by lightning played a major role in forming and maintaining many of Florida's natural communities (habitats) such as pine lands, sandhills, scrub, prairies and wetlands. Native plants and animals in these areas developed special characteristics making them well-suited to survive in areas regularly exposed to fire. Over time, these fire-adapted natural communities not only withstood effects of fire, but came to depend upon fire for their existence.

Historically, Native Americans, farmers and ranchers imitated natural fire cycles to clear land and spur new plant growth to support game or livestock. However, as more people moved into Florida, houses and businesses began to displace many natural areas, and historical land-management practices fell out of favor. As development spread, fewer fires occurred and many native species became threatened or endangered.



Today the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) uses prescribed fire, sometimes referred to as controlled burns, to remove overgrown vegetation and provide plentiful food and open space that wildlife need to thrive. Blackened tree trunks or scorched palmettos may look dead, yet the process of renewal has already begun. The nourishing grasses and wildflowers that burst from the enriched soil provide forage for deer and many other species of wildlife.

Habitats are enhanced

Eastern meadowlarks (pictured) and red-cockaded woodpeckers are among the many birds that benefit from prescribed burning.



Threatened species benefit

Prescribed fire restores habitat conditions that will benefit keystone species like gopher tortoises. Gopher tortoise burrows provide shelter for many animals during prescribed burns as well as the rest of the year.



Prescribed fire rejuvenates the land

Controlled burns clear dead and overgrown brush from beneath trees and release nutrients into the soil, allowing sunlight to reach the ground and stimulating seeds to sprout.





Prescribed burning benefits wildlife

Fire's influence on the landscape is so vital to the survival of numerous plant and wildlife species that prescribed burning is one of the FWC's most extensively-applied habitat management practices. It is an essential, cost-effective tool for restoring and maintaining the natural plant and animal communities in Florida's Wildlife Management Area (WMA) system. Effective prescribed burning removes dense undergrowth and results in new growth of native plants. This low-growing new vegetation provides a nutritious food source and the appropriate shelter for wildlife.

Without prescribed burns, Florida's fire-adapted plant and animal communities would disappear from the diverse mosaic that is the State's extraordinary natural landscape. Red-cockaded woodpeckers, bluebirds, fox squirrels, gopher tortoises and many other animals must have forest openings and combinations of plants that thrive in regularly-burned habitats.

Prescribed burning benefits people

Well-managed natural areas provide abundant wildlife, beautiful scenery and open vistas for people to enjoy. By using prescribed fire, the FWC improves recreational opportunities such as hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing and hiking, and helps maintain clean air and drinking water essential for human health. Eliminating overgrown vegetation even reduces the amount of moisture that evaporates from plants into the air. This means more water is soaking into the ground to replenish Florida's aquifer, the source of our drinking water.

Prescribed burning is safe

Safety is the FWC's highest priority. Burn managers identify areas in need of fire, and draw up detailed, area-specific plans, called burn prescriptions.



Fires are carefully managed

Staff in safety gear are deployed around the outside of the burn and monitor its progress.



Wildfire risks are reduced

Prescribed burning removes overgrown brush and reduces the risk of fast-moving wildfires that can threaten people, wildlife and property.



A controlled burn is a prescription for healthy wildlife habitat

Before a prescribed burn

Before conducting a prescribed burn, FWC staff creates a detailed, area-specific burn plan outlining how the burn is to be conducted, a description of the area, required weather conditions, personnel and equipment, and emergency contacts. Necessary authorizations are secured, and staff notifies neighbors. Burns are conducted in defined areas bounded by man-made firelines or natural fire breaks such as rivers or swamps.

During a prescribed burn

Prescribed burns, unlike wildfires, are brief. They generally start in late morning and are over by late afternoon. Skilled teams of experienced professionals conduct burns during optimum weather conditions that limit smoke. They use a variety of specialized equipment, tools and techniques to ensure that the fires are well-managed and safe.

During a prescribed burn you may see tall columns of smoke, as well as slow-moving flames in the distance below the tree tops. By contrast, wildfires often engulf and kill trees and send walls of flame and dense smoke racing through the forest.

After a prescribed burn

Right after a prescribed burn, the area may appear charred and bare. Prescribed fire clears dead and overgrown brush from beneath trees, reducing the threat of a devastating wildfire.



A few months later, wildlife flourishes

Only a few months following a prescribed burn, the natural area is lush and wildlife is thriving. Fire helps regenerate the plants that many animals need for food and shelter. Ground-nesting birds like the Bachman's sparrow, wild turkey and quail need the cover of low-growing vegetation resulting from frequent fires. Even frogs, salamanders and other wetland species need prescribed fire to maintain suitable areas for breeding. By using prescribed burns to manage the land, wildlife populations remain healthy, and imperiled species like the Florida scrub-jay, red-cockaded woodpecker and Southeastern American kestrel have suitable habitat to recover.



Prescribed burning benefits the habitat that fox squirrels need. Photo by Jason Slater, FWC

Common concerns

Harm to wildlife – Some people worry that many animals are harmed by prescribed burns. The slow-moving flames of carefully planned burns allow animals time to find shelter or move away from the fire. Some fly away and many small species scurry down a deep gopher tortoise burrow or stump hole for refuge. Ultimately, the benefits of prescribed burns outweigh negative impacts to wildlife.

Ash – If you live next to a Wildlife Management Area, you may see ash during and after a prescribed burn. Although ash is annoying, it is not dangerous and is easily washed away with a hose.

Smoke – Prescribed burns are conducted during weather conditions that minimize smoke impacts. Smoke plumes travel high into the air where they quickly dissipate, although the area may smell smoky for a day or two.

What you can do to help

- Learn more about prescribed burning at MyFWC.com/RxBurn.
- Support prescribed burning on conservation lands. By doing so, you are helping the native plants and animals living in Florida's natural communities, while reducing the risk of wildfire.

When you visit a WMA or other conservation land and see amazing wildlife there, remember that prescribed burns, safely and regularly conducted, provide healthier habitats for wildlife, which in turn helps create memorable experiences for people.

Questions?

Visit MyFWC.com and follow the AskFWC link at the top of the page.

Front cover: red-cockaded woodpecker, © David Moynahan



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