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Great Plains Fire Communication Kit

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This document is available for download at <http://GPFireScience.org>. For a hardcopy, contact GPFireScience@gmail.com

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Additional materials for reference

You can find these reports on the web bundled with this kit for download. Many of them have been cited in the kit and will provide important reference information for you as you work with neighbors and the public.

- Fire Public Opinion Poll by The Nature Conservancy and others 2008
- Fuel Treatments Helped Wallow Fire 2011
- Iowa Fire Cedar Survey
- NIFC Annual Report 2012
- Rocky Mountain Annual Report 2011
- Southern Wildfire Risk Assessment 2006
- 2011 Texas Wildfires

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This kit was originally designed in 2012 by Jon Schwedler and Wendy Fulks for use with Nature Conservancy Fire Management staff and Outreach Specialists. The kit was adapted by Sherry Leis with Great Plains Fire Science Exchange. We thank two reviewers for commenting on the revised kit.

Comments or updates can be sent to GPFireScience@gmail.com. For more information, visit <http://GPFireScience.org>

Happy burning and stay safe!



INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The purpose of this kit is to provide tools to help you be prepared for communicating proactively and reactively to issues around fire. The ultimate goal was to lay the social and information groundwork that will allow you to conduct burns while demonstrating respect for neighbors.

We encourage you, your association, and your neighbors to be *proactive* in sharing your plans to burn. Letting your neighbors, rural fire departments, other local officials, and possibly local media know of your plans months in advance can be helpful. Even if your contacts don't immediately respond, they may call you when wildfire potential gets high or you get closer to your burn window. However, you may find that you are contacted *reactively*.

If you are working with a team or group, designate someone as the spokesperson. Designating a public information officer before, during, and after the fire can ensure that accurate information gets shared to the inquiring minds. It also frees up everyone else to concentrate on the fire.

Your efforts to not only use fire, but to share your plans, process, and rationale on fire's critical role in land restoration helps the land and the whole community of conservation minded landowners, professionals, and public land managers!

How to use this kit

Each section of this guide is designed to be used independently. This way you can rapidly refer to the section that is most relevant. Reviewing the whole kit prior to burn season is recommended, however.

1. Review the materials and fill in items in red with your own information.
2. Meet with your burn crew/association to identify opportunities for communication needs and even potential media outlets.
3. Gather specific information on species and fire that can be used to make your pitch more attractive to neighbors and local media (examples: wildlife and fire-dependent plants that benefit or invasive species that can be controlled).
4. Identify and train one spokesperson that will be onsite at the burn *and* one spokesperson who will staff the telephone at home or offsite and will be available for inquiries. This training can be as simple as asking your spokespeople to learn the messages and walking them through a mock interview.
5. Do *proactive* outreach around *controlled burns* using your identified opportunities.
6. Do *reactive* responses to *emergency wildfires* as best determined by your team.

THINGS TO BE AWARE OF

1. **Timing and location:** Both are exceedingly important when communicating about a wildfire; in short, do NOT talk about the benefits of controlled burns while people and their homes are immediately threatened by nearby wildfire. Guidance on this is provided in the *Emergency Fire Messages--[Reactive](#)* section of this guide.
2. **Media:** That said, the weeks following a wildfire is one of the few times the condition of our forests and grasslands is top-of-mind for the public. Media will be much more receptive to fire pitches during this reactive time.
3. **Fire makes good video:** Controlled burns are very videogenic and one of the few conservation stories we can “make happen” on cue for local TV news or other media (although weather can be a limiting planning factor).
4. **More “before/after” photos needed:** Photographs can be very powerful in getting your message across or swaying a reluctant neighbor. Taking photos of burn units before a fire treatment, immediately after, and in the following seasons to demonstrate recovery (possibly the most important image) is a great way to monitor your success and help you tell your story. Your photo could lead to this kind of [story](#).
5. **You know your audiences best:** Use the messaging guidelines as it works for you: you are the best arbiter of what messaging will resonate most with your audiences.
6. **The funny hat rule applies:** The most trusted spokespeople are the guys/gals in firefighting gear. Having a designated on-the-ground spokesperson will really help your cause.

CONTROLLED BURNING MESSAGES—PROACTIVE

To most people fire is scary. A 2008 public polling study found that even though the majority of Americans are aware of the natural role of fire in healthy landscapes, most are still more likely to describe fire as “dangerous” rather than “natural.” Your job is to justify the use of controlled burns by convincing the public and your neighbors they are necessary, safe and effective.

How to use this messaging section

- Use this to inform your interactions with neighbors, public officials, local rural fire departments, and the public—presentations, media interviews, partner meetings.
- Try to commit to memory the words to use *and* the 6 bolded messages. Shop among the facts beneath the bolded messages for those most compelling for your audience.
- If you have local examples that support these messages, plug them in! Local is better.
- **Practice.** Hitting messages takes practice. Take time to do some dry runs.

Words to use

These word suggestions are the result of national polling research done by The Nature Conservancy and others. Some of the language agencies use is difficult to understand and fire jargon may not be understood by your non-burning neighbors. If our goal is to successfully communicate, we must use language our audience understands.

- **“Planned, controlled burns”** is better understood by the public at large, not *“prescribed fire”*: polling very strongly supports this.
- **“People”** not *“human communities”*: saying “human” makes it sound like you’re an alien.
- Use **“Where homes and forests meet”** or **“homes near natural areas”** instead of *“wildland-urban interface”* or *WUI*:
- Use **“Fire team”** not *“fire crew”* or *“fire module”*: a “team” contains a variety of expertise and is more proactive and methodical.

Messages

It is critically important that the *first* message you share, regardless of the question, is the **value** of the lands you are burning. Most people you need to communicate with are likely unaware of all the many benefits that forests and grasslands provide, such as provisioning clean water, timber, recreation opportunities, livestock forage, and wildlife habitat. If you do not first establish these values, the treatments could seem frivolous, costly and needlessly dangerous. Make them *feel* this activity is worth the risk.

1. VALUE: **“We need to keep our forests/grasslands healthy so they can continue the life-giving services they provide.”**

A. Forests:

- *Forests store and filter half the nation’s water supply;*
- *Provide jobs to more than a million wood products workers;*

- Offer 640 million acres of recreational lands;
- Forest Service lands alone generate \$14.5 billion in recreation annually;
- Provide habitat for thousands of species across the country.

B. Grasslands:

- Grasslands are important in filtering and purifying water, promoting healthy soil and recycling nutrients.
- Grasslands make up approximately 95 percent of the privately owned land it takes to maintain beef cattle in the Great Plains and western U.S. (30% of the world's land area is grassland.)
- Grasslands support recreational activities and have tremendous scenic value.
- Many wildlife species depend on grasslands for food, concealment from predators and nesting sites.
- **Your local examples providing superlatives for the lands you are treating.**

2. THREATS: "But there are serious threats to the services our forests/ grasslands provide."

A. Forests:

- A century of suppressing fire has left many of our forests choked with too much fuel that can result in damaging, costly fires.
 - The five largest national fire years in terms of acreage have all occurred since 2004.
- More and more homes are being built near fire-prone forests. It costs taxpayers a great deal to protect these places from inevitable natural processes, such as wildfire. Meanwhile, the health of these areas suffers due to the lack of natural disturbances.
 - The Texas Forest Service and Insurance Council of Texas estimated in 2011 that firefighters saved 38,252 homes, but property damage totaled \$500 million and 2909 homes were lost. (Texas Star-Telegram).
 - Interagency crews spent \$99,689,105 fighting fires on over 40,000 acres alone in 10 Great Plains states in 2012 (NIFC).
 - Prescribed burning aided fire teams in putting out wildfires and saving homes around Big Stone National Wildlife refuge in 2007.
- Climate change is further knocking forests off balance.

B. Grasslands:

- Only 3 percent of American native grasslands remain.
- A lack of regular fire is allowing trees such as eastern redcedar to invade vast areas of grasslands. Such invasions can harm water quality, air quality, public safety and health, wildlife and agriculture.
 - Almost half of the native grassland in Oklahoma has been invaded by eastern redcedar, and that acreage is doubling about every 18 years.

- *The Oklahoma Redcedar Task Force estimated that in 2001, the loss of cattle forage, wildlife habitat (lease hunting), recreation, and water yield due to eastern redcedar invasions was \$218 million.*
- *Native tallgrass prairie can be converted to a closed canopy of eastern redcedar in less than 40 years.*
- *Wildlife grassland species are in jeopardy in the US because of shrinking habitats. (examples: greater and lesser prairie chickens, grasshopper sparrows, meadowlarks, horned lizards, and more).*

C. Your local examples of problems that controlled burns will address.

3. FIRE IS NATURAL: “For hundreds of thousands of years, fire has shaped many of our forests, grasslands, and wildlife. These lands actually need fire to be healthy.”

- *Conservancy scientists estimate prior to the arrival of Europeans, more than half of the land in the lower 48 states burned at least once every 35 years. Many of these natural burns were low intensity fires that cleared out grasslands and forest undergrowth while leaving large trees unscathed.*
- *In [COUNTY/STATE] we have many plants, habitats, and wildlife that need regular fire to exist.*

4. TREATMENT: “Today a fire team of X professionals (or fire fighters) with Y number years of controlled burns experience is treating Z number of acres. The plan for this controlled burn has been developed over X months. The [Association/Team/Family/Ranch] has been conducting controlled burns for X years.”

5. SAFETY: “The safety of people is our number 1 priority for this controlled burn—neighbors and the fire team. We are working closely with X, Y, Z local fire departments/state agencies.”

6. SOLUTIONS: “The planned, controlled burns performed today will help:”

- **“Make this area safer from unplanned fires” by reducing the available fuel.**
 - *Controlled burns and other treatments helped save several communities in Arizona during the Wallow Fire of 2011.*
 - *During Colorado’s record-setting 2002 Hayman Fire, a previous controlled burn reduced fuel enough to actually change the fire’s behavior and stopped it from going any further in that direction.*
- **“Save money”**
 - *Interagency crews spent \$99,689,105 fighting fires on over 40,000 acres alone in just 10 Great Plains states in 2012 (NIFC).*
 - *The Forest Service spent more than a quarter of its FY11 budget fighting emergency fires (\$1.4 billion), and the costs are going up each year.*

➤ *Compared to tree thinning and other treatments, controlled burning is an environmentally appropriate and cost-effective way to maintain healthy, fire-adapted forests and to keep native grasslands free from invasive trees and shrubs.*

a. In 2006, Colorado's Front Range Roundtable estimated the cost of controlled burning at \$114 per acre, compared to \$654 per acre for thinning.

b. The Natural Resource Conservation Service estimated prescribed burn costs in 2013 for the Great Plains ranging from \$7-21/acre. (Figures do not include firebreak construction which averages \$8/acre for medium types).

• **“Make the land healthier for people, water, and wildlife.”**

Northern Great Plains: *The Prairie potholes and surrounding grasslands are in jeopardy of conversion to agriculture. These areas are rich breeding grounds for water fowl and other grassland species.*

Southern Great Plains: *This part of the region is important for cattle production and ecotourism. Grasslands are key for water and wildlife conservation. Cities like Dallas and Oklahoma City are nestled in grassland areas that are becoming choked with hazardous fuels like cedar trees. Regular fire treatments can reduce the risk of catastrophic fire near urban areas.*

Central Great Plains: *Regular controlled burning keeps eastern redcedar and other invasive brush and tree species in check; this benefits both wildlife and livestock. Even in places that haven't been invaded by woody plants, controlled burning can improve the quality and quantity of grassland forage for livestock and make plant communities more drought resistant.*

Western Great Plains: *More than 100 million acres of western ponderosa pine forests are choked with too many small trees and brush. Controlled burns remove some of this material, reducing competition for water and nutrients and making the remaining trees healthier.*

EMERGENCY FIRE MESSAGES—REACTIVE

There is a reason why shouting “fire” in a movie theater will get you arrested— people have an instinctual, fearful response to fire. The time and place to discuss the benefits of fire is **NOT** when an out-of-control fire is currently threatening your community’s lives and property.

Yet emergency fires are the focus of intense local and national media attention, one of the few times the public focuses on the health of America’s forests and grasslands. Given the right audience, timing, spokesperson, and messaging, the emergency fire season is an important time to heighten the public’s awareness about forests, grasslands, and fire.

This chapter offers guidance on timing and messages for you to speak with media, government, partners, and the public at large during, or in the aftermath of an “emergency fire”.

Note: We define an “emergency fire” as a large wildfire that is: (1) likely to have significant negative effects on ecosystems in some areas, (2) threatening people’s lives and/or property, (3) being actively fought by fire response agencies, and (4) the current extent was unplanned.

These messages are broken into 3 sections based on timing and audience because messaging for each of these scenarios is different.

During Emergency Fire— In the Local Community Experiencing Fire. Example: the town of Alpine during the Wallow Fire in Arizona

During Emergency Fire— Communities Elsewhere Not Experiencing the Fire. Example: Portland, Oregon during the Wallow Fire

During Emergency Fire— National Media and Government Relations. Example: responding to Washington Post inquiry about the Wallow Fire

How to use emergency messaging recommendations

- Make sure you are first coordinating with your spokesperson.
- Go to the messaging section that describes your current fire situation.
- Try to commit to memory the words to use and the messages for your scenario.
- If you have local examples that support these messages, plug them in! Local is better.
- *Practice.* Hitting messages takes practice. Take time to do some dry runs.

Words to use

These word suggestions are the result of national polling research done by The Nature Conservancy and others. Some of the language we ordinarily use in fire can be foreign to the rest of the public; if our goal

is to successfully communicate we must use language our audience understands.

- **“Planned, controlled burns”** not *“prescribed fire”*: polling very strongly supports this.
- **“People”** not *“human communities”*: saying “human” makes it sound like you’re an alien.
- **“Where homes and forests meet”** or **“homes near natural areas”** not *“wildland-urban interface”* or *WUI*:
- **“Fire team”** not *“fire crew”* or *“fire module”*: a “team” contains a variety of expertise and is more proactive and methodical.
- Use **“uncharacteristic fire or emergency wildfire”** not just *“wildfire”*: use a descriptor for the type of wildfire being fought. We don’t want to suggest that all wildfires are bad. You might say something like *“The Cottonwood fire is uncharacteristic of the kind of fire we typically see in this area,”* or *“The emergency wildfire burning in Cottonwood County was started by an escaped brush pile burn.”*

Messaging

Scenario 1: During Emergency Fire— In the Local Community Experiencing the Fire

Smoke is choking the town, people are being evacuated, homes are being lost. State and national media are on location looking for interviews. Please limit your comments to:

1. **GRATITUDE, PROFESSIONALISM, AND SAFETY: You are grateful for the hard work and professionalism of the agencies and individuals working on this fire. Your hope above all is for the safety of firefighters and residents, with minimal loss of property.**
2. **HOW MANY (team/association/ranch members) INVOLVED: The TEAM has provided X number of firefighters to this response, who are from Y and Z counties.**
3. **DO NOT:**
 - Speculate on the cause of the fire or potential harm or benefit to natural systems. Wait for post-fire analysis.
 - Say that more controlled burns can reduce the potential for emergency fires. This might be true but local folks may react hostilely to more fire at this point.

Scenario 2: During Emergency Fire— Communities Elsewhere Not Experiencing the Fire

People in other communities are watching the news and glancing back at the woods or pastures in their own backyards. These people are thinking of prevention, and open to solutions. Please focus your comments on:

1. **EMPATHY AND SAFETY: “We empathize with the people of X community and our hope above all is for the safety of the firefighters and residents, with minimal loss of property.”**
2. **LOCAL RELEVANCE: “We here in Y community potentially face a similar situation or have already faced a similar situation with the Z fire.”**
3. **UNHEALTHY STATE OF GRASSLANDS: “Our grasslands here are at risk to these same kinds of intense fires that burn too hot and too fast to control, due to a century of suppressing fire. Without periodic fires our grasslands have become unhealthy and choked with brush.”**

- *With only 3% or less of grasslands in the US remaining, it is important to maintain these critical resources in good condition for ecosystem health, ecological services, and human safety.*

4. VALUE OF GRASSLANDS: “This is very unfortunate because healthy grasslands provide life-giving services and jobs our nation depends on.”

Grasslands:

- *Grasslands are important in filtering and purifying water, promoting healthy soil and recycling nutrients.*
- *Grasslands make up approximately 95 percent of the privately owned land it takes to maintain beef cattle in the Great Plains and western U.S.*
- *Grasslands support recreational activities and have tremendous scenic value.*
- *Many wildlife species depend on grasslands for food, concealment from predators, and nesting sites.*
- *Grasslands are important stores of carbon, holding about 30% of the world’s carbon, mostly below ground.*

5. COSTS: “Also, fighting these emergency fires is very costly, and costs are steadily rising.”

- *The Forest Service spent more than a quarter of its FY11 budget fighting emergency fires (\$1.4 billion).*
- *Since 1960, the five biggest fire years in acreage have all occurred since 2004.*
- *Nationally, in 2012 fewer fires were reported than the last few years, but it was the 3rd highest year on record for acreage.*
- *In 10 Great Plains states during 2012, interagency crews spent \$99,689,105 fighting the fires that were more than 40,000 acres each (NIFC).*
- *During 2012, 32% of the fires reported by the National Interagency Fire Center occurred in the Great Plains states (10 states).*

6. SOLUTION: “Fortunately there are cost-effective solutions.”

- *We can pre-treat our grasslands at a lower cost so they are healthier, safer, and provide jobs to local communities.*
 - *Controlled burns and other treatments helped save several communities in Arizona during the Wallow Fire of 2011.*
 - *The Natural Resource Conservation Service estimates prescribed burn costs in 2013 for the Great Plains ranging from \$7-21/acre. (Figures do not include firebreak construction which averages \$8/acre for medium types).*
 - *In 10 Great Plains states during 2012, interagency crews spent \$99,689,105 fighting the fires that were more than 40,000 acres each (NIFC).*
- *We can reduce the exposure of homes located in fire-prone areas by being smarter about how we design and build them. For example, by planting only fire-resistant shrubs and trees around houses, and using fire-resistant roofing material.*

- *The Texas Forest Service and Insurance Council of Texas estimated in 2011 that firefighters saved 38,252 homes, but property damage totaled \$500 million and 2909 homes were lost. (Texas Star-Telegram).*
- *Prescribed burning aided fire teams in putting out wildfires and saving homes around Big Stone National Wildlife refuge in 2007.*
- *We can allow more naturally ignited wildfires to burn under circumstances where it is safe to do so and in instances when people, water, and wildlife will ultimately benefit.*

Scenario 3: During Emergency Fire— National Media and Government Relations

National media and elected officials are watching wildfires and anxious to provide answers. We need to be judicious and disciplined in our response but not neglect to offer our expertise in improving the situation.

1. **EMPATHY AND SAFETY:** “We empathize with the people of **X community** and our hope above all is for the safety of the firefighters and residents, with minimal loss of property.”
2. **HOW MANY (team/association/ranch members) INVOLVED:** The **TEAM** has provided **X number** of firefighters to this response, who are from **Y and Z** counties.
3. **OUR GRASSLANDS ARE IN AN UNHEALTHY STATE:** “Unfortunately the fire at **X community** is a dangerous symptom of a much larger national problem. Across the country our forests/grasslands are at risk to these same kinds of unnatural fires that burn too hot and too fast, due to a century of suppressing fire. Without natural fires, our grasslands have become unhealthy and choked with brush.”
 - *In 2002, the Eastern Redcedar Taskforce estimated that 300,000 acres per year of eastern redcedar and other juniper trees needed to be treated in Oklahoma alone.*
4. **VALUE OF GRASSLANDS:** “This is very unfortunate because healthy forests/grasslands provide life-giving services and jobs our nation depends on.”

Grasslands:

- *Grasslands are important in filtering and purifying water, promoting healthy soil and recycling nutrients.*
 - *Grasslands make up approximately 95 % of the privately owned land it takes to maintain beef cattle in the Great Plains and western U.S.*
 - *Grasslands support recreational activities and have tremendous scenic value.*
 - *Many wildlife species depend on grasslands for food, concealment from predators and nesting sites.*
5. **COSTS:** “Also, fighting these emergency fires is very costly, and costs are steadily rising.”
 - *The Forest Service spent more than a quarter of its FY11 budget fighting emergency fires (\$1.4 billion), and the costs are going up each year. Since 1960, the five biggest fire years in acreage have all occurred since 2004.*
 - *Nationally, in 2012 fewer fires were reported than in the last few years, but it was the third highest year on record for acreage.*

- *In 10 Great Plains states during 2012, interagency crews spent \$99,689,105 fighting the fires that were more than 40,000 acres each (NIFC).*
- *During 2012, 32% of the fires reported by the National Interagency Fire Center occurred in the Great Plains states (10 states).*

6. SOLUTION: “Fortunately there are cost-effective solutions.”

- *We can pre-treat our grasslands at a lower cost so they are healthier, safer, and provide jobs to local communities.*
 - *Controlled burns and other treatments helped save several communities in Arizona during the Wallow Fire of 2011.*
 - *The Natural Resource Conservation Service estimates prescribed burn costs in 2013 for the Great Plains ranging from \$7-21/acre. (Figures do not include firebreak construction which averages \$8/acre for medium types).*
 - *In 10 Great Plains states during 2012, interagency crews spent \$99,689,105 fighting the fires that were more than 40,000 acres each (NIFC).*
- *We can reduce the exposure of homes located in fire-prone areas by being smarter about how we design and build them. For example, by planting only fire-resistant shrubs and trees around houses, and using fire-resistant roofing material.*
 - *The Texas Forest Service and Insurance Council of Texas estimated in 2011 that firefighters saved 38,252 homes, but property damage totaled \$500 million and 2909 homes were lost. (Texas Star-Telegram).*
 - *Prescribed burning aided fire teams in putting out wildfires and saving homes around Big Stone National Wildlife refuge in 2007.*
- *We can allow more naturally ignited wildfires to burn under circumstances where it is safe to do so and in instances when people, water, and wildlife will ultimately benefit.*

7. DO NOT:

- **Speculate on the cause of the fire or potential harm or benefit to natural systems. Wait for post-fire analysis.**

FIRE PITCH

Like the other fire messages provided in this communications kit, you will be the best arbiter of what pitch is most effective for inquiries in your area. Offered below are some points that may be useful in crafting a pitch to media. You may wish to also proactively offer the [Final Five Fire Myths](#) along with your pitch, which may boost their interest.

1. **Subject Line:** “[DATE], Location—we’re burning nature to save it”
 - Use a controlled burn you are doing to attract a reporter to hit the fire messages
2. Much of the country has had a [dry winter](#) (and [this season we are expecting.....](#)), which often leads to a dangerous wildfire year
 - We’ve already seen signs of this so far in [[list areas/states with active wildfires](#)].
 - The National Weather Service seasonal outlook shows...(look at appropriate map product <http://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/predictions/90day/>).
3. In the past decade, we have experienced larger and more dangerous wildfires; nationally (since 1960), the 5 years with the most acres burned have all occurred since 2004 (NIFC 2012 report). The Rocky Mountain region covers much of the Great Plains where 2012 and 2006 saw the greatest number of acres burned of the last 10 years. This is due to:
 - An unnatural build-up of brush and small trees in our grasslands and forests ([use your local examples](#)).
 - Climate change is also likely playing a role, with warmer and dryer seasons in much of the country ([again use your local examples](#)).
 - Expansion of urban areas into wildlands.
4. Ironically, the answer to the large, emergency fires that have occurred is doing more, smaller, controlled, planned burns. In this case, we are burning nature to save it.
 - This approach is [safer](#) (see Forest Service PDF on how treatment saved communities during 2011 Wallow Fire);
 - much more cost effective;
 - In 10 Great Plains states during 2012, interagency crews spent \$99,689,105 fighting the fires that were more than 40,000 acres each (NIFC), but estimated costs of conducting prescribed fire on private rangeland are only \$7-21/acre on average plus cost of fireline construction. (Natural Resource Conservation Service data).
 - In FY11 the Forest Service spent \$4 fighting fires for every \$1 it spent on programs designed to prevent the risk of emergency fires (Forest Service budget justification to Congress).
 - and better for the health of our lands. For eons our grasslands evolved with frequent natural and Native American fires. Our grasslands need fire to be healthy just as much as they need water (historically about two-thirds of the country experienced fire

regularly, at least once every 5-35 years). The Forest Service estimates [more than 40% of the lands it manages need restoration work](#) performed (an area the size of Colorado and West Virginia combined).

5. This is our **Association's/Organization's/Ranch's X** year doing controlled burns;
 - Since **[year]** we have burned more than **X** acres locally in an effort to spur the growth of native plants and wildlife, expand agricultural capacity, and reduce the spread of foreign and native invasive species.
 - **Your local examples.**

Date

For Immediate Release

**Media Contact name, Organization
Phone Number, [email](#)**

PRESS RELEASE—CONTROLLED BURN

Partnership Plans Controlled Burns in **Location**

Burns Will Promote **X Wildlife** and **Y Safety** Benefits

DATE (TOWN, STATE) — Grasslands store and filter much of the nation’s water supply, generate recreational income annually, and provide habitat for thousands of species across the country.

Here in **TOWN/COUNTY/STATE** our grasslands provide home to **X wildlife (rare, iconic, charismatic species), Y water, and Z jobs.**

To help preserve these benefits, today a fire team of **X** experienced burners with **Y number** years of controlled burning experience is treating **Z** number of acres. The plan for this controlled burn has been developed over **X** months. We expect smoke to be visible, particularly in **X and Y locations.**

Safety is our primary concern during this controlled burn. The **Local Fire Station/State Fire Authority/Local fire authorities** and experienced fire teams will closely monitor local weather conditions, such as wind and humidity, and make adjustments in the schedule as needed to ensure the safety of both crew members and local residents.

For thousands of years, fire shaped our forests, grasslands, and wildlife. Our lands actually need fire to be healthy, and Native Americans extensively used fire to create pasture for prey and to help with farming. The Nature Conservancy estimates that historically 9-16 million acres of U.S. natural areas burned each year. Many of these burns were frequent, low-intensity fires that cleared out undergrowth while leaving large trees unharmed.

The **Association/organization** has been using controlled burns as a tool to mimic this natural process for **X** years. These planned burns help make the land healthier for people, water, and wildlife, such as deer, turkey, quail, prairie chickens, and many migratory birds.

Controlled burning can also reduce the risk of costly, unplanned, and potentially dangerous fires.

Optional smoke language: Smoke from controlled burns is typically short-lived and managed to reduce impacts. Controlled burns can reduce the severity of subsequent wildfires and the impacts of the smoke such fires create to air quality, public health and safety. In populated areas, fire planners work closely with weather experts and use sophisticated models and smoke management forecasts to predict smoke behavior and minimize impacts.

Insert partnership / Fire Learning Network / Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration project language if applicable

For more information on the organization's/association's work with fire, see [web address](#).

FIVE FIRE MYTHS

1. **Myth: Fire is bad for grasslands and wildlife. Truth: Fire is necessary for healthy grassland ecosystems.**

For eons America's forests, grasslands and wildlife evolved with frequent, naturally-occurring and human caused (Native American) fire. Fire can "rejuvenate" a grassland, enriching the soil and allowing more light to hit the ground. This in turn creates more food for wildlife, including turkeys and elk, and livestock. Native Americans were aware of these benefits and often set fires to create more forage for the wildlife they hunted. All told, biologists estimate two-thirds of America's lands experienced regular fire before Europeans settled on the continent.

2. **Myth: Fire is bad for our water supply. Truth: Using fire to improve ecosystems will help to increase water to aquifers and improve runoff to streams.**

Forests cover about a third of the nation, and provide about half of our water supply. Grasslands act to capture and filter water on its way to the aquifer. Healthy grasslands also reduce erosion, protecting streams. While it's certainly true that some big, severe fires have harmed water quality with ash and erosion, in many places the ability of our grasslands to store and filter water would improve with more frequent fires. This may seem counter-intuitive, but frequent fires can help keep brush from expanding in size and area and extracting water that the soil could otherwise be storing. For example, eastern redcedar trees can intercept up to 52% of precipitation that would otherwise reach the soil in addition to extracting soil water. Fire prevents the conversion of grassland to woodland, helping to keep moisture in the soil.

3. **Myth: The big fires we've had in the past decade have not been out of the ordinary. Truth: Wildfires are trending to encompass larger areas than in the past three decades.**

While the nation experienced several large tragic fires at the turn of the 20th century, our five biggest fire seasons in terms of acres burned over the last 50 years have all occurred since 2004. This includes 2012 when Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Texas all experienced record fires. In 2012, although there were fewer fires nationally, the number of acres was in the top three of record. In many of our forests and grasslands an unnatural build-up of brush and small trees, in combination with drought and warming temperatures, are contributing to a different kind of modern fire—bigger, more intense, and more dangerous. These "mega-fires" kill not just brush and trees, but also the large foundation trees that ordinarily survive a fire, leaving nothing behind. Further complicating these conditions is an increase in new homes and businesses in

and very near more of our rangelands and prairies today, exposing more people to fires than in previous times.

4. *Myth: Suppressing all wildfires is the best way to prevent dangerous, costly fires.*

Truth: Fire suppression has altered ecosystems and increased the likelihood of large fires.

It isn't a question of "if" we have fires, but "when" and "what kind". Putting out all fires is simply not possible and the attempt to do so leads to dangerous buildups of fuel which results in the costly firefighting emergencies we see today. The best way to protect people, water, and wildlife is by performing controlled burns, installing job-creating thinning projects, and letting some fires burn when and where it is safe to do so. For example, controlled burns and thinning projects performed ahead of time saved the Town of Alpine, Arizona from destruction in 2011's huge Wallow Fire.

5. *Myth: In the larger scheme of things, we don't spend much fighting fires. Truth: Federal wildfire operations are extremely costly.*

Costs are on everyone's minds these days. In fiscal year 2011, the Forest Service spent more than a quarter of its total budget fighting emergency fires, four times the amount that went to programs dedicated to reducing the risk of emergency fires in the first place. In 10 Great Plains states alone, \$99,689,105 was spent to fight only the fires covering more than 40,000 acres each in 2012. This doesn't include costs for smaller fires. It would be more cost-efficient—and better for our ecosystems, water, and wildlife—if we invested more in proactive grassland or forest restoration.

In the Great Plains, prescribed burn associations (PBA) have been forming and expanding in recent years. These local landowner groups pool resources and experience to increase the number of prescribed fire acres conducted on private lands. The groups pay dues and develop guidelines and training programs to help each other care for their lands. In some cases, PBAs have even helped out during wildfires.

Controlled burns, job-creating tree removal projects, and smarter development practices are proven tools to make our grasslands safer, healthier, and more cost-efficient. Pursuing this more proactive approach will improve the state of our waters, wildlife, and wallets.

GUIDE TO FIRE FACEBOOK POSTS, TWEETS AND BLOG POSTS

Sample Twitter Posts

- “You like firefighters, right? Meet [**local fire expert or burn boss**].” *Develop short story on the individual and post the link.*
- “Extreme nature makeovers -- before and after pics from [**your name/organization**] controlled burns.” *Add the images to twitter with short descriptions and post link.*
- “Hot flash-backs: **X** years of burning nature to save it” *Write a short article about the changes over time if you’ve been burning for a while.*
- Test your fire IQ in our interactive quiz – let us know your score!_
<http://nature.ly/u104oU> *[This twitter post is appropriate for many audiences of your prescribed burning messages.]*

Facebook Promotions:

Repost these stories to your Facebook page to educate your friends.

Extreme Nature Makeovers

Yes, fire can be used as a restoration tool! See how powerful it can be in this slideshow featuring before and after images from controlled burns.

Here’s an example by the Nature Conservancy. You can post your pictures to Facebook or set up your own blog. You can even post to the Great Plains Fire Science Exchange blog or Facebook page. <http://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/habitats/forests/explore/slide-show-of-controlled-burns.xml>

Burning Nature to Save It

Find out how we use fire as a restoration tool – and why it's needed now more than ever. *Write your own article about why you use fire. Take a look at this example from The Nature Conservancy. <http://blog.nature.org/2012/04/reflections-on-50-years-of-burning-in-the-nature-conservancy/>*

Living With Fire

A certain amount of fire is sometimes necessary to allow animals and plants to thrive. Here's what you need to know. *Here are some links to videos you can share with your fans.*

[Great Plains Fire Science Exchange Landowner video series](#) (Each video is less than 10 minutes. Titles include: *Why burn, Getting Started, Challenges to Using Fire, and A Community Approach to Fire*)

[Fire In the Tallgrass Prairie video series](#) (Videos are around 20 minutes long. Titles include: *Preserving the Tallgrass Prairie and Through the Haze: Prescribed Fire and Smoke Management*)

[Plenary session talks from the 66th Society for Range Management conference](#) (Listen to Drs. Dale Rollins, Tom Swedberg, and Sam Fuhlendorf discuss critical issues in fire science on rangelands including climate change, invasive plant management, and grazing interactions.)

ESCAPED BURN—TALKING POINTS

Introduction

The escaped controlled burns like the Pautre Fire in South Dakota this year can increase public discussion and concern about the safety of controlled burning. As a land manager using controlled burning, it may be helpful for you and your team members or association to be prepared to communicate about these types of fires and controlled burning in general. If your communications are not handled appropriately, the possibility remains for significant erosion of public support for prescribed burning, potentially resulting in restrictions applied more broadly in your area.

The goal of the following messaging is to appropriately express your sympathies for people in areas where controlled burns escaped, and recognize the risks of fire, while supporting the case for the need of controlled burning. This document was modified by one developed by the Nature Conservancy in 2012 and was adapted for more broad use in the Great Plains fire community by Great Plains Fire Science.

Step 1: Please designate a spokesperson to respond to controlled burning inquiries from the media, neighbors, and others and work with your prescribed fire association and extension specialists to coordinate responses.

Step 2: Ask team members, association members, or other crew members who are not the designated fire spokesperson to respond to inquiries this way:

- *“I’m not the best person to answer that question. **THIS PERSON** is the **program director/burn boss** and is the most informed person. Let me have **HER/HIM** call you. Here is their #.”*
- If the inquiry comes from media, respond: *“I’m not our media person. Please get in touch with **MEDIA PERSON** at # to find the best person to speak with.”*

Step 3: If you are the spokesperson, determine if the questions asked are appropriate for you to respond to. If the inquiry is solely about an escaped controlled burn of concern and not about controlled burns in your area, then it may be best to restrict your comments to incidents you are familiar with. Perhaps refer the inquiry to another knowledgeable source such as a county extension agent.

Once you have determined the questions address controlled burning in your area, please consider using the following words and responses.

Words to Use:

These suggestions are the result of national polling research done by The Nature Conservancy and others. Some of the language we ordinarily use in our work is foreign to the public; if our goal is to successfully communicate we must use language the public understands.

- **“Planned, controlled burns”** is better understood by the public at large, not *“prescribed fire”*: polling very strongly supports this.
- **“People”** not *“human communities”*: saying *“human”* makes it sound like you’re an alien.
- Use **“Where homes and forests meet”** or **“homes near natural areas”** instead of *“wildland-urban interface”* or *WUI*:

- Use **“Fire team”** not *“fire crew”* or *“fire module”*: a “team” contains a variety of expertise and is more proactive and methodical.

Q&A:

Try to hit each bolded statement in your answers. Offer the supporting bulleted factoids as desired.

1. Why are you doing controlled burns?

“We do controlled burns to increase safety and to restore the health of our lands.”

- A. Safety— “Without fire, our grasslands and pastures will become covered with trees. As a result, fires might be more devastating and we will lose valuable plants, wildlife, aesthetic, and production value. Controlled burns like this are also a fraction of the cost of fighting wildfire.**

- The Wallow Fire in Arizona and the Las Conchas Fire in New Mexico in 2011 are an indication of what can happen with too much fuel on our lands. All told more than 8 million acres burned in the U.S. in 2011.
- This trend is going up-- the 5 largest national fire years in terms of acreage since 1960 have all occurred since 2004, and 2012 was a devastating year for wildfire in the Great Plains.
- The Las Conchas Fire alone cost \$48 million to fight.
- Controlled burning reduces the amount of flammable material in an area, thereby reducing chances that a wildfire will threaten people and natural areas.
- Controlled burns and other treatments helped save several communities in Arizona during the Wallow Fire of 2011.

- B. Restoring healthy lands— “For eons wildfires shaped many of our forests, grasslands, and wildlife. These lands actually need fire to be healthy.”**

- Scientists estimate prior to the arrival of Europeans, more than half of the land in the lower 48 states burned at least once every 35 years. (The Nature Conservancy).
- In [STATE] we have many plants, habitats, and wildlife that need regular fire to exist.

- C. Value of healthy lands— “Our lands provide us life-giving services our nation needs to maintain. We need to keep them healthy.”**

- Forests:
 - Forests store and filter half the nation’s water supply;
 - Provide jobs to more than a million wood products workers;
 - Offer 640 million acres of recreational lands;
 - Forest Service lands alone generate \$14.5 billion in recreation annually;
 - Provide habitat for thousands of species across the country.
- Grasslands:
 - Grasslands are important in filtering and purifying water, promoting healthy soil and recycling nutrients.
 - Grasslands make up approximately 95% of the privately owned land it takes to maintain beef cattle in the Great Plains and Western US.
 - Grasslands support recreational activities and have tremendous scenic value.
 - Many wildlife species depend on grasslands for food, concealment from predators, and nesting sites.
- **Your local examples providing superlatives for the lands you are treating.**

2. How do you do a controlled burn?

“Our/my controlled burns are planned and we have been trained by XXX with safety as our/my primary concern.”

- A. Safety— **“The safety of fire teams and the public is the first consideration of every burn.”**
- The average controlled burn takes several months to plan and the plan is reviewed by XXX.
 - We make extra effort to communicate our plans with the local fire department and our neighbors as well as complying with regulations.
 - I/our fire team has X years of experience using fire.
 - The “Burn Boss” who leads the controlled burn must have experience working on fires before leading one.
- B. Experience— **“Our Association has X years of experience burning and we burn more than X acres each year.”**
- C. Results— **“Our controlled burns have helped restore XXX acres in STATE, and resulted in greater numbers of YY and ZZ rare species.” (use your examples of how fire has helped the land)**

3. Isn't burning dangerous? I've heard of controlled burns that became wildfires?

- A. Sympathy— **“As members of the fire management community, I/we/Association name are deeply saddened by the loss of life and property associated wildfires. Our thoughts are with those who have lost loved ones and families who have lost their homes.”**
- B. Learning— **“We want to hear the results of the investigations of controlled burns that became wildfires and understand the lessons of those incidents.”**
- C. Your role— **“That said, we/I was/were not involved in any controlled burns that started wildfires.”**
- D. Your excellent record— **“We ourselves have been doing controlled burns on our lands for X years with an excellent safety record, to great restoration success.”**
- We've had no serious injuries or fatalities from any of our controlled burns.
- E. Choice between good and bad fire— **“Ultimately, the more planned, controlled, good burns we do as a nation, the fewer dangerous, bad fires we will have.”**

4. Do you think more restrictions should be placed on controlled burns?

- A. Experience— **“Personnel on burn teams often have hundreds of years of combined controlled experience.”**
- Explain the experience qualifications for the team you are working with.*
 - Burn Bosses have years of experience leading burns and often lead dozens of burns per year
- B. Choice between good and bad fire— **“Ultimately, the more planned, controlled, good burns we do, the fewer dangerous, bad fires we will have.”**

5. What happened at XXX Fire?

- Your role— “**We were not involved in the controlled burn that started that fire.**”
- Route to media person— “**You might read the [interagency description](#) for more information.**

6. Only offer this information if you’re pressed to substantiate your excellent safety record:

Your prescribed fire escape rate is approximately **0.X%** and there have been no serious injuries or fatal accidents. **You**, like many others, define an escaped fire as one that has gone outside the planned burn area and requires calls for assistance to contain the escape. This is differentiated from small spots or areas of fire that might cross control lines and are quickly extinguished by firefighters on the burn.

IMAGES

Add your own images to the kit to help you tell your fire stories. Include photos from before and after controlled burns. Be sure to label them with a date and location. Make sure images you share show people on the burn teams using proper protective equipment and techniques.

WEB RESOURCES

[National Interagency Fire Center webpage](#)— Historic fire information by state that can be useful in crafting pitches to state media.

[Communicators Guide for Wildland Fire Management](#)—An online guide developed by the National Wildfire Coordinating Group. Other great communication resources are also available on this page.

["Social Motivation in the WUI: Ways to Effectively Engage the Public"](#) — Recorded webinar presentation on fire and social engagement from Sarah McCaffrey, social scientist for the USDA Forest Service, April 2012. WUI stands for Wildland Urban Interface, that zone where the city meets the country. Sarah's work shows that people want information.

[Ready, Set, Go!, Firewise, and Fire Adapted Communities](#)— Partnerships between firefighters, insurance companies, and the federal government that teach people how to prevent and respond to emergency fires. These are useful to offer media as a "what you can do" websites.

[Great Plains Fire Science Exchange](#)—This website has great information resources and ways to contact experts in the field if you need help.

[Public Information Officer resources](#)—Podcasts and messages for the upcoming season.

[Current wildfires](#)—National maps of active incidents.

Oklahoma State University [fire video](#)—Includes effects on wildlife, woodlands, and grasslands.

[The prairie naturalist](#) blog—Covers fire, grassland ecology, and restoration.

The [effects of fire on wildlife](#) in tallgrass prairie—Review paper discussing wildlife response to fire.

[2011 Texas Wildfires: Common Denominators of Home Destruction](#)—Texas Forest Service Report.

[Fire in the South 2: Southern Wildfire Risk Assessment](#)—A 2006 report from the Southern area.

[National Interagency Coordination Center: Summary and statistics Annual Report 2012](#)

[Rocky Mountain Area and Coordination Center 2011 Annual activity report](#)—2011 report from the Rocky Mountain area which covers much of the Great Plains region.

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