



Fire Learning Network Notes from the Field



Refugio-Goliad Prairie: Burning through the Drought Late Summer Prescribed Fire September 2012

Never Say Never

As the long, hot summer of 2012 began winding to a close, 1,282 acres on the Refugio-Goliad Prairie went up in flames. In spite of numerous reasons not to do prescribed burning—drought, burn ban, insufficient crew—partners in this landscape were able to work together to overcome obstacles and continue their program of getting good ecological fire on the ground. According to prescribed fire specialist John De Leon, “we had to call everyone in”—from other Conservancy units in Texas, and from Texas Parks and Wildlife—to pull it off. Longtime partners in the prairie, managers on the Shouse and Vidaurri ranches had prepared units on their land, which

were burned over the course of a week and a half, along with 220 acres on the Conservancy’s Mad Island Marsh preserve.

Paradoxical Conditions

As with much of the country, Goliad and Refugio counties were under a drought-induced burn ban this summer. In order to conduct these burns, partners requested exceptions to the ban—in one case, having the fire chief tour one of the ranches to assess the conditions and preparations. Exceptions granted, operations could begin.

Remarkably, however, conditions were against the crews: the fresh, green fuels failed to carry fire as well as needed to provide the desired fire effects on the Shouse ranch. A change in firing pattern was made, with three strip head fires laid down so that a whole unit was treated with head fires. With this change, at least the lower end of the ecological objectives could be met. “We used the conditions we had as best we could,” said De Leon. The ranch manager was

In spite of widespread drought, many of the units were green, resulting in mild burning conditions (*left*). The fire crew from the Conservancy and Texas Parks & Wildlife Department therefore shifted tactics. Three strip head fires were laid down (*right*) to increase fire intensity, which then fell within the stated objectives for the burn.
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pleased with the burn, which should stimulate forage growth next season.

Continuing Progress

All told, the project went well: Crews were able to burn all except two of the units that had been planned. Landowner partners were pleased with the results. Fire continued to be used on the prairie in a year that might have said “no.” And partners are set up to continue to work together well in the next burn season, and continue work toward the landscape goal of engaging more landowners in the use of prescribed fire on this landscape.

Participating Organizations

- Shouse Ranch
- Texas Parks & Wildlife Department
- The Nature Conservancy
- Vidaurri Ranch

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Why Fire on the RGP?



The fire-dependent coastal prairies support—among other animals—both ranch families and the federally-listed Attwater’s prairie chicken. By partnering to use fire, the needs of both are supported. On the RGP, a prairie chicken restoration and reintroduction program has been in place since 1997 and 30,000 acres of private ranches are now under a safe harbor agreement for the birds, which allow the birds to be released onto private properties while allaying landowners’ fears about future property use restrictions related to the Endangered Species Act.

The Fire Learning Network is supported by *Promoting Ecosystem Resiliency through Collaboration: Landscapes, Learning and Restoration*, a cooperative agreement between The Nature Conservancy, USDA Forest Service and agencies of the Department of the Interior. For more information about the FLN, contact Lynn Decker at ldecker@tnc.org or (801) 320-0524.



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