

WHAT IS A PRESCRIBED FIRE?

A prescribed fire, or prescribed burn, is an organized, coordinated effort that works to apply fire at the right place, at the right time, and at the right intensity to improve the health and resilience of forests, grasslands and shrublands. A prescribed fire is very different from a wildfire because it is planned months, sometimes even years, in advance. The burns are conducted under precise weather conditions (i.e., the prescription) by trained crews. Wildfires on the other hand, are unplanned fires that occur during extreme conditions, which can pose threats to public safety and cause damage to natural resources.



WHO CONDUCTS BURNS ON STATE GAME LANDS?

The Pennsylvania Game Commission is responsible for prescribed fires conducted on State Game Lands and lands enrolled in the Hunter Access Program. The agency employs more than 200 habitat management staff, which includes foresters and land managers, many of whom participate on burn crews as one of their many duties. The Game Commission often partners with organizations like the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, The Nature Conservancy, Letterkenny Army Depot, and Fort Indiantown Gap, among others, which allows more burns to be accomplished across all lands.



CONTACT US

Pennsylvania Game Commission
Your State's Wildlife Agency

HEADQUARTERS

2001 Elmerton Avenue, Harrisburg, PA 17110-9797
Phone: 717-787-4250

REGION OFFICES

Northwest Region: Butler, Clarion, Crawford, Erie, Forest, Jefferson, Lawrence, Mercer, Venango, Warren counties
1509 Pittsburgh Road, Franklin, PA 16323
Phone: 814-432-3187

Southwest Region: Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Cambria, Fayette, Greene, Indiana, Somerset, Washington, Westmoreland counties
4820 Route 711, Bolivar, PA 15923 | Phone: 724-238-9523

Northcentral Region: Cameron, Centre, Clearfield, Clinton, Elk, Lycoming, McKean, Potter, Tioga, Union counties
1566 South Route 44 Highway, Post Office Box 5038, Jersey Shore, PA 17740-5038 | Phone: 570-398-4744

Southcentral Region: Adams, Bedford, Blair, Cumberland, Franklin, Fulton, Huntingdon, Juniata, Mifflin, Perry, Snyder, York counties
8627 William Penn Highway, Huntingdon, PA 16652
Phone: 814-643-1831

Northeast Region: Bradford, Carbon, Columbia, Lackawanna, Luzerne, Monroe, Montour, Northumberland, Pike, Sullivan, Susquehanna, Wayne, Wyoming counties
3917 Memorial Highway, Dallas, PA 18612-0220
Phone: 570-675-1143

Southeast Region: Berks, Bucks, Chester, Dauphin, Delaware, Lancaster, Lebanon, Lehigh, Montgomery, Northampton, Philadelphia, Schuylkill counties
253 Snyder Road, Reading, PA 19605
Phone: 610-926-3136

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PRESCRIBED FIRE

PENNSYLVANIA GAME COMMISSION WILDLIFE HABITAT MANAGEMENT



Managing and protecting wildlife and their habitats while promoting hunting and trapping for current and future generations.

WHY ARE PRESCRIBED FIRES GOOD?

Fire improves wildlife habitat and hunting opportunities by increasing soft mast production in shrubs like blueberry, huckleberry and blackberry. They rejuvenate succulent browse plants preferred by deer and elk, which promotes oak habitats, and their vitally important acorns, and maintains grasses and broadleaf plants sought by brooding turkeys and grouse. Prescribed burns also reduce the severity of unplanned wildfires by removing leaves, thick grasses, and forest debris that accumulate without regular fire.



WHEN ARE PRESCRIBED FIRES SCHEDULED?

Prescribed fires can be conducted throughout the year, depending on the ecological objectives. In Pennsylvania, most burns take place in March, April, May and November when grass is dormant and leaves are off, allowing sunlight and wind to dry the forest floor. While weather conditions and dryness are the primary factors for scheduling, the Game Commission also considers potential impacts to plants and animals, particularly those listed as “threatened” or “endangered,” and adjusts burn timing accordingly to reduce conflicts.

WHAT HAPPENS ON THE DAY OF THE BURN?

The burn area will be closed to public access through a variety of notification methods, including signage at the game lands and through the Game Commission’s online Hunter Notification map. The crew is briefed on the burn plan and forecasted weather conditions. A contained “test fire” is typically lit mid- to late-morning in a small area to see if conditions are appropriate for proceeding with the full operation. If the test fire achieves expected

results, and weather conditions remain within the prescription, crews will begin burning along the firebreak on the downwind or uphill side of the unit to widen the control line, which helps to ensure that the remainder of the burn will stay contained. Crews will then continue burning into the wind and downslope, sending fire into the previously burned or blackened area. This process continues until the whole unit is burned out. While ignition is taking place, additional crews patrol the firebreak perimeter to ensure the fire stays where it’s supposed to. Other crew members are assigned to monitor the weather and smoke conditions throughout the day to ensure the fire stays within its prescription and is achieving the desired ecological effects. Smoke will be visible during the burn and might be seen for many miles. Smoke will generally dissipate once ignition is complete but may linger in the immediate vicinity for several hours after the burn while downed logs smolder and burn out. Crews will remain on site until they are sure the fire is contained to the burn unit and is out cold along the firebreaks.

WHAT DOES THE AREA LOOK LIKE AFTER THE BURN?

Immediately after the burn, the ground will be black until regrowth occurs, which typically takes place within a few days, in some cases several weeks, depending on the time of year. In the forest, fires typically just consume the leaves, sticks and low growing vegetation. Mature trees are left standing and are typically not impacted by the fire, (unless that is the desired effect). Mid-level vegetation is often left standing, but is often top-killed by the fire, meaning the stem is dead but it will resprout from the roots. These resprouts provide valuable browse for wildlife. The increased light provided from knocking back small saplings and brush coupled with reduction in leaf litter or grass thatch will greatly enhance opportunities for new species to grow, particularly native grasses and forbs.

IS WILDLIFE HARMED BY PRESCRIBED FIRE?

The Game Commission primarily burns to benefit wildlife and maintain the long-term health of their habitats. Crews are highly-trained and qualified to light fires in a way that allows wildlife to escape, often with crew members walking through units before and during burns to ensure

the area is clear of wildlife. (Remember: Prescribed burns are not the same as wildfires.) Yet even with these precautions, there are rare instances when animals and/or their nests may get burned. Yet, all is not lost. We work closely with wildlife biologists to ensure that while some nests may be lost throughout the year due to prescribed fire activities, the burns are restoring acres of healthy habitat that ensure significantly more nests will be successful for many years into the future. Furthermore, Game Commission biologists and emerging science indicates that wildlife are often attracted to burned areas immediately after the fire, occasionally entering burned areas before the smoke has even cleared, (to forage on a sudden flush of insect activity), or shortly afterwards, when a fresh flush of vegetation appears. Finally, it is important to note that the agency’s prescribed fires are purposely conducted on a very small percentage of the overall land base, (less than 1 percent annually), providing significant amounts of refuge for animals that may be temporarily displaced.



HOW WILL I KNOW WHERE AND WHEN BURNS ARE PLANNED?

The Game Commission maintains a public map that shows where prescribed burns are being planned. This map is updated seasonally and will even show “Burn Imminent” status when a burn date has been confirmed. Users must realize that these decisions are highly weather dependent and therefore cannot be made more than a few days in advance. In addition to the map, users will see signage posted around the burn unit identifying the area as a planned burn during the coming weeks or months.

