

Posted 9:35 pm Thursday, April 21, 2011

Prescribed Burning Necessary For Texas

Wildfires have reached the Piney Woods of East Texas and the tragedy is compounded because, in many places, the fires could have been prevented. Sadly, well-intentioned but short-sighted public policy has played a role. Those policies have made Texas a tinderbox.

“One of the driest spells in Texas history have left most of the state in extreme drought and wildfires in various parts of the state have burned more than 1,000 square miles of land in the past week — an area that together would equal the size of Rhode Island,” the Tyler Paper reported on Tuesday. “In East Texas, closer to the border with Louisiana, new blazes broke out in an area known for its thick forests, sometimes called the Piney Woods. About 3,000 acres have burned in the area, Texas Forest Service spokesman Marq Webb said.”

And closer to home, firefighters in Smith, Henderson, Anderson, Rusk and Cherokee counties have responded to 132 fires since the beginning of the year that have burned 837 acres of land, Gerry Haverland, Texas Forestry Services dispatcher, said.

Gov. Rick Perry, calling for a federal disaster declaration on Monday, predictably called for stronger penalties against arson.



But those aren't the policies that need changing. A more sensible strategy of prescribed burning is what Texas needs.

Fire, and its use under control as a wildlife management tool and fire prevention tool, was the focus of a public hearing in Mount Pleasant in 2008 — prior to the 2009 legislative session, when Texas lawmakers could have done something about it. The hearing was held by the Texas Houses Committee on Culture, Recreation and Tourism.

“We are having a revolution in land ownership and use,” said Mort Kothmann, a professor of Range Management Science with the Texas AgriLife Extension Service and a Mason County landowner. “In the past, we fire-proofed the landscape in Texas with cattle and by removing the trees. We are growing fuel now like we have never seen before.”

Despite legislation passed in 1999 designed to encourage prescribed burns, private landowners today find themselves handcuffed by county burn bans and a lack of state-certified prescribed-

burn managers. Required to have \$1 million of liability insurance, few people can afford to be certified by the Texas Department of Agriculture.

In East Texas, prescribed burns were common into the 1980s on the more than 12 million acres of forest land for both wildlife and forest management. They were replaced by herbicides in the 1980s because of the concern of liability from fire.

What's needed now is for the Texas Forest Service to get back into the business of prescribed burning. It should also work with landowners, teaching them about prescribed burns, and helping to establish landowner cooperatives — in which shared equipment, experience and knowledge will make the state safer.

The Legislature can help. It can allow certified burn managers to conduct burns using the landowners' liability insurance to training landowners and allowing them to burn their own property or on neighboring properties that are part of a burning cooperative. That would result in more certified burn managers able to keep the state from going up in flames.

Lawmakers also can reform tort law to offer protection to landowners who do a prescribed burn and for county commissioners who approve burns during burn ban periods.

Care must be exercised, of course. But the best way to prevent wildfires is to deprive them of fuel.

Source: <http://www.tylerpaper.com/article/20110421/OPINION01/110429972/-1/OPINION>