

# Safety of controlled burns questioned

## Water Utilities overseeing large open fires

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- [Josh Hinkle](#)

AUSTIN (KXAN) - On the outskirts of Austin, homeowners know all too well their risk of a wildfire sparking.

Coming off one of the most disastrous seasons in the state's history, Wayne Schwartz has been proactive, cutting back the brush that could fuel a fire around his place on the west side of the city.

"It's a very hilly area, and it's basically covered in cedars," Schwartz said, staring at the thick woods from his back porch.

Not far away, there is a section of 40,000 acres of Austin Water Utility's wild lands. Officials say it is a \$160 million taxpayer investment, yet something the city-owned utility wants to set on fire. And that concerns Schwartz.

"Experience is very important," he said. "They're not the fire department. Even if they use the fire department, I don't think they'd have the manpower or water if something goes wrong."

What the water company plans to is called a prescribed burn -- another way to get rid of brush that might otherwise become fuel in the event that an unplanned fire flares up. This week, miles away, [Austin Water used flames to manage brush on 560 acres of native grasslands](#) and also to make sure what flows into the aquifer is as pure as possible.

### Protecting Barton Springs

It is all part of caring for the Water Quality Protection Lands, which directly relates to Barton Springs. This vast space accounts for 26,000 acres of the utility's management area.

It has been two years since crews have even been able to think about setting a prescribed fire. The dry conditions during the drought have made it too risky because even a planned burned could have spiraled out of control.

This week's burn site in northern Hays County was on the lower edge of the utility's land. The county just lifted its burn ban, and - as other areas follow suit - officials expect more fires like that in the future, shooting for 2,000 acres annually if conditions are ideal.

The fire was expected to take five to six hours to complete, and the burned area will be extensively patrolled for a week after the fire.

Over the past decade, Austin Water Utility has torched 5,500 acres. It took 29 prescribed burns, but less than half of those - 13 - had help from the Austin Fire Department.

"An Austin firefighter should be there to put it out, to make sure it's done safe, to make sure we have the right people on scene to make sure it doesn't get out of control," said Bob Nicks, Austin Firefighters Association president.

### **Worth the risk?**

The association, which advocates for rank-and-file firefighters on pay and benefits issues, said the water utility might be risking too much by not having enough proper personnel.

"If the prescription calls for 10 firefighters to put it out, there needs to be 10 Austin firefighters there," Nicks said.

This week's burn had 30 people on the crew, but only nine were with the Austin Fire Department.

"When they light that fire, there's Austin firefighters on the ground, working as hand crews helping to manage that fire and keep it within the control lines," explained Harry Evans of the fire department.

Still, the firefighters association has concerns over those numbers. So now, both the water and fire departments are hammering out safety guidelines for upcoming collaboration.

"(It is for) understanding between the two departments that can formalize roles and responsibilities," Evans added.

"Our job is not firefighting," said Willy Conrad, the utility's wild land conservation manager. "We're not firefighters. We're land managers. We use prescribed burning for management."

### **Expenditures for new equipment**

In recent years, records show that meant spending around \$175,000 for brush trucks, ATVs, drip torches, and other gear.

According to Austin Water Utility, they have hired off-duty firefighters to help and partnered with the Texas A&M Forest Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife, to name a few agencies. There is also a new certified burn boss to lead the team.

"All of our fire-trained people go through a fire refresher each year that's required to maintain the NWCG (National Wildfire Coordinating Group) certifications," said Conrad

- **AFD reminds people to learn their wildfire risk and what you can do to prepare your home and family at [www.prepared.ly](http://www.prepared.ly) .**

Knowing one of these prescribed burns might someday be near his neighborhood, Schwartz said he can only hope it reduces the risk of a wildfire instead of sparking one.

"By acts of God, there's nothing you can do about it," he said. "But for a manmade situation, that would be terrible."

Austin Water Utility describes the steps of preparation for the prescribed fire:

- Wind speed and direction, humidity and a host of other factors must meet safety requirements before a burn can begin. After establishing a perimeter of natural and hand-cleared firebreaks devoid of fuel, the crew will light a downwind backfire, which burns slowly as it moves into the wind.
- As the backfire burns away fuels, it creates a blackline. The crew patrols the firebreak perpendicular to the backfire, establishing a handline, where an igniter will use a drip torch to set a flank fire to clear fuels along the handline.
- When the flank fire has burned away enough fuel, an igniter will set the headier along the windward firebreak.
- Fueled by the wind, the headfire typically burns quickly, but extinguishes itself by burning straight into the backfire.