



Hoosier National Forest Highlights



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Why Prescribed Burning?



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Hoosier National Forest staff spends a lot of time and effort in wildfire prevention and suppression. We also spend time preparing and conducting prescribed burns. Other agencies including the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service also use prescribed burning. Why do we do both, isn't fire just bad? The answer is complicated but there is a significant difference between prescribed burning and wildfire.

The differences between wildfire and prescribed burning are purpose, planning and control. Wildfires have no predetermined control lines, occur under random weather conditions, and consume whatever is in their path, sometimes destructively. Prescribed burning is applying fire in a controlled area under exacting weather conditions to achieve specific results.



One of the immediate benefits of prescribed burning is that it reduces the risk of wildfire by consuming hazardous fuels. Burning is also a very cost effective management tool, often having the lowest cost/acre of any other vegetation management practice used by the Forest Service.

It is important to realize that, historically and prehistorically, fire was an important part of the forest landscape throughout the country. In the Midwest, humans, not lightning were the cause of most fires. Even today, less

than 1% of all wildfires in Indiana are caused by lightning. Historic burning by Native Americans is well documented. Studying tree rings, researchers have determined that in southern Indiana, woodlands and barrens were burned at least every 8-12 years prior to European settlement. Burning by Native Americans, to varying degrees, shaped our landscape and current ecosystems.

With settlement came a dramatic and significant change to the landscape. Settlement brought wide spread land conversion and eventually fire suppression. Most forest areas were harvested and converted to crop or pasture land. Natural communities that were once common were severely diminished. For example barrens, areas of shallow soil but great biologic diversity, once occurred extensively in southern Indiana but are now relegated mostly to public land.



Furthermore, oaks and hickories have been losing ground to beech and maple. These reductions are attributed to, among many things, lack of fire in the forest.

Prescribed burns have become standard on the Hoosier. The practice conserves what may become lost if not for our actions. We burn to keep the barrens, prairies, and oak-hickory forests and woodlands part of the Hoosier landscape.

We carry out our program with the support of many non-governmental organizations including The Nature Conservancy, National Wild Turkey Federation, and Quail Unlimited, among others.



These groups work with us and support prescribed fire because they have also seen the benefits of rare species rebounding with the use of prescribed fire. Species such as the French's shooting star (shown at left) has made real headway with their population since a regular burning regimen has returned to the barrens. The chestnut oak barrens, an ecosystem which would otherwise have been lost, are thriving again.

In former pine stands, where the goal is to convert to oak and hickory, prescribed fire helps reduce thin barked trees such as maple and beech in favor of

more fire-resistant oak and hickory which are preferred by many wildlife species.

The answer to the question, “isn’t all fire bad?” is still complicated. However, the body of evidence supporting the benefits of prescribed burning is substantial and still growing. The next time you see or smell smoke, it may be a good thing.

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