

News Column

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SMOKE AND FIRE

While visiting Grandma (my mom) over the Easter weekend, I took the family for an after-church drive to see the farm that we own south of Speed. On the way through Speed I pointed out my great grandmother's house that is now a bar, the school I attended through sixth grade, and the elevator where I learned cuss words that I knew never to use.

South of Speed I pointed out the location of the old stone house where we went after school in fourth grade to smoke cigarettes that my juvenile delinquent friends had stolen from their parents.

That got their attention!

Everyone in the family knows that I don't like smoke. Smoke, artificial scents that some folks call air fresheners, and perfumes, all do the same thing to me. They plug my sinuses, give me a headache, and sometimes make me sneeze. After being exposed to offensive scents for just a few minutes I'll be plugged up for about 24 hours, then I'll be good again as long as the scent is gone.

Although I loathe smoke, I don't have the same feeling about fire. I have to admit that I fear fire, but I love it nonetheless. I empathize with the folks who dread the smoke in the air each spring during range burning season, but I love fire for its long-term impact on the environment.

Without fire, much of our rangeland would be rendered useless for grazing by the invasion of cedar trees. Granted, it would take several years for cedar trees to take over, but

eventually they would do just that. Because I like to eat, and because I believe healthy rangeland is a valuable part of our agriculture system, I'm happy to endure a few smoky days each spring.

Being a natural born skeptic, I catch myself asking some of the same questions the anti-smoke activists might ask, like, "Do you really need to burn every year to control cedar trees? Why not every 10 or 20 years?"

The experts say we can control cedar trees by burning just every third or fourth year, and I agree that's about right. Three to four year old trees are still small enough to be consumed by a good fire.

Ten year old trees, on the other hand, might be three to four feet tall and too big to kill with fire the first year burned. You'll probably have to burn two or three years in a row to clean up a neglected pasture.

The other problem with letting a pasture go 10 to 15 years between burnings is the intensity of the fire if the trees do catch fire. Bigger trees can be harder to burn, and they can also be harder to put out once they start burning.

Again, being a skeptic, I ask the question, "Why not just cut those trees by hand instead of burning?" This is a question that answers itself pretty quickly. Just go cut a few by hand and you'll have your answer. Mechanical control is labor intensive and time consuming. Burning is quick, easy, and cost-effective.

Cedar trees aren't the only invasive specie kept under control by burning. Plants like buckbrush, sand plum, and other woody perennials can be kept under control with properly timed annual burning. To control woody species, a late spring burn (usually mid-April in Riley County) is needed. Burning earlier would kill cedar trees, but wouldn't affect most of the woody perennials.

There aren't many land or wildlife managers who would dispute the value of fire as a land management tool. Those who are only interested in wildlife habitat might burn earlier (February or March), while cattlemen generally prefer to burn in mid-April.

Wildlife managers might want to burn less frequently and will likely want to maintain some unburned areas every year. Cattlemen running stockers (500 pound calves) would like to burn annually to increase calf gains. And, cow-calf producers might be content to burn every third or fourth year, just to control cedar trees.

I learned when I was in fourth grade that I didn't like smoke, and that feeling hasn't changed. Fire, on the other hand, has always intrigued me. Fire scares me, but I like it. When it is under control, I love fire for the great things it does to improve our rangeland and wildlife habitat.

Happy burning season. Stay safe, ...and stay upwind as much as possible.

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmclure@ksu.edu.

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