



Title: PRESCRIBED BURN MANAGEMENT POLICY	
Page: 1 of 5	Policy Number: 03.60.00
Approval Date: 01/23/2019	Last Revised Date:

Subject: GENERAL OPERATIONS
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Category: DISTRICTWIDE POLICY
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POLICY STATEMENT:

It is the policy of the Forest Preserves of Cook County (the “District”) to use prescribed burns at designated District areas to reduce the risk of wildfires, improve wildlife habitats and ecosystems, and control the growth of invasive and non-native plant species.

PURPOSE:

Prescribed burning is a valuable and cost-effective ecosystem management tool for the District. To restore and maintain healthy, native, fire-dependent community types in our forest preserves, prescribed burns are necessary to simulate the historic fires that shaped and maintained our natural systems.

The goals of policy are to:

1. Describe and guide the use of prescribed burns on District property;
2. To help promote healthy, diverse, and native ecosystems;
3. To help control invasive and non-native species;
4. To help reduce the adverse impacts of uncontrolled and other wildfires on public health and the environment; and,
5. To educate and inform the public about the benefits, timing and location of the Districts prescribed burn program and other restoration related efforts.

The goals of the Districts Prescribed Burn Management Policy are in support of the Illinois Prescribed Fire Council “[Illinois Prescribed Fire Needs Assessment](#)” Report, published in 2016.

AFFECTED AREAS:

This policy applies to all District owned, leased, and/or managed properties. This policy applies to all District staff, contractors, volunteers, and all other authorized individuals approved to conduct prescribed burns on District property.

DEFINITIONS:

Prescribed Burn: A fire implemented in a skillful manner to vegetative fuel including but not limited to woodlands, grasslands, wetlands, and savannas at specific locations for specific ecological purposes and under exacting weather and fuel conditions to achieve ecological and management goals.

Wildfire: Any unplanned ignition of fuels that requires active or passive containment or suppression.

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Burn Plan: A detailed plan that identifies the burn units in a preserve, the weather parameters, any preserve hazards, preferred wind directions, preferred burn method, smoke management, access, ecologically sensitive areas, ecological goals of burn management, any special conditions, preserve map and a list of local or county authorities and homeowners to be contacted.

Burn Unit: A District preserve area or unit of a preserve delineated to receive burn management.

PROCEDURE/PROCESS:

- 1) The District’s Resource Management Department will develop an official “**Prescribed Burn Management Plan**”, consistent with standards developed by the [National Wildfire Coordinating Group](#), and in alignment with this policies goals, no later than the end of the 2019 calendar year.

Below is a brief description of the plans and procedures the District has adopted to comply with state burning laws and to ensure safe and effective use of prescribed burning on District lands. This includes planning, permitting, communications plans, and internal infrastructure requirements.

- A. **Prescribed Burn Management Plan:** The District’s prescribed burn program will be guided by a district-wide burn program plan that states the goals and direction of burn activities. This plan shall contain a description of the District’s fuels, resources, and strategies for implementing prescribed burns. Roles and responsibilities will be outlined in this document.
- B. **Site Burn Plans:** Preserves that require fire for ecological or management purposes shall be divided into sections, or burn units, within which fire will be applied. Each preserve with burn units shall have a written burn plan that contains the following information necessary to effectively manage a prescribed burn at that site. This includes: Emergency Assistance Contacts, Pre-Ignition Notification, Description of the Prescribed Burn Area, Goals and Objectives, Burn Prescription (Weather Conditions and Fuel moisture, etc.), Smoke Management and Sensitive Areas, Firebreak Preparations, Ignition Plan, Holding Plan and Hazards, Contingency Plan, Mop-Up Requirements, a Pre-Burn Checklist and Crew Briefing Checklist.
- C. **Smoke Management Planning:** In our highly urbanized environment, managing the impacts of smoke is important. Ensuring smoke does not impact homes, roads, or other sensitive areas is a goal for our prescribed burn program. Each burn unit shall be assessed for potential smoke impacts and burn prescriptions shall be written to ameliorate those impacts.
- D. **Wildfire Response Plan:** Wildfires are fires of unknown origin – they may be started by lightning, a carelessly tossed cigarette, or other unintentional or intentional ignition source. The District responds to wildfires to ensure they are properly managed. When practical, District responses are coordinated with local fire departments or other responders, as appropriate. A wildfire response plan shall be made available to each prescribed burn leader and their department leads as well as District Police leads. This plan shall outline roles and responsibilities for wildfire response activities by the District and appropriate integration with non-District response units.
- E. **Permitting:** The District shall acquire permits from required state and local authorities to ensure burns are within compliance. Currently those include permits from the Illinois EPA and the Cook County Department of Environment & Sustainability.

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F. Communications Plans:

- Alignment/Informational Document: The District’s Resource Management Department has created an educational/informational document detailing how prescribed burns align with the District’s mission and the scientific communities’ land management best practices. This document is found in **Appendix A** of this policy document.
- Operational Communication Plan: Prescribed burning requires communication with municipalities, local fire departments, various state and local agencies, and other stakeholders. The District shall identify required legal contacts and include those contacts within each site burn plan.
- Public Information Plan: A public information plan shall be made available to the department leads, the District communications director, the District lead attorney, and prescribed burn leaders. This plan shall outline roles and responsibilities for communicating information related to prescribed burns or wildfires to the media and general public. The plan will also outline basic strategies for informing the public about the benefits of prescribed burning, and where and when burns are going to take place.

G. Infrastructure Requirements:

- Staffing: A safe and successful prescribed burn program will require essential resources and infrastructure. The District shall retain employees that have prescribed burn training. Those staff will receive training to the level commensurate with the role they will fill on the crew. The details of those training requirements can be found in the District prescribed burn management plan.
- Equipment: Additionally, each crew shall have access to the necessary tools, equipment, and personal protective equipment needed to safely and effectively implement a prescribed burn. Essential tools and equipment shall be itemized in the site burn plans.
- Contractors: The District may employ qualified environmental contractors to lead and assist with burns on District preserves, and would be subject to District policies and guidelines

RESPONSIBILITY:

The Resource Management Department: The Resource Management Department shall manage the implementation of this policy.

TRAINING REQUIREMENTS:

- 1) All relevant District employees, contractors, volunteers, and other authorized individuals permitted to participate in prescribed burn activities should be trained on this policy.

COMMUNICATION PLAN:

- 1) This policy should be distributed to all relevant staff and other authorized individuals permitted to conduct prescribed burns on District property.
- 2) This policy should be added to the District shared drive, intranet, and website.

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REFERENCES:

Forest Preserve District of Cook County
Protection of Natural Features and Wildlife (FPDCC Code Section: Chapter 2)

POLICY LEAD: John McCabe
Director of Resource Management

APPROVAL: Arnold Randall
General Superintendent

POLICY HISTORY:

Approved: 01/23/2019
Revised: **Revised:**

If you have questions, comments, or suggestions concerning District policies, please contact:

Forest Preserve District of Cook County
Office of the General Superintendent
69 W. Washington St., Suite 2040, Chicago, IL 60602
Email: FPD.Policy@cookcountyil.gov



APPENDIX A: PRESCRIBED BURNS PROGRAM ALIGNMENT/INFORMATIONAL REPORT

Alignment with Mission: Prescribed burns are an efficient and effective management tool for maintaining and improving the natural ecological communities of Cook County. The major ecological communities represented on our preserves, open wetlands, prairies, savannas, and oak woodlands are all fire-dependent. As an effective tool and essential ecological process, the use of prescribed burns is fully aligned with the District's mission, *"to acquire, restore and manage lands for the purpose of protecting and preserving public open space with its natural wonders, significant prairies, forests, wetlands, rivers, streams, and other landscapes with all of its associated wildlife... now and in the future."*

Historical Function & The Science of Fire in Natural Systems: The natural ecological communities of historic Cook County are still present on District property. These communities developed under the influence of climate and fire. The plants and animals that make up these communities have adaptive strategies for surviving and thriving with fire. When fire is removed from these communities, they suffer. Undesirable plants that do not grow well when exposed to fire begin to dominate properties.

In Cook County, many ornamental plants from Europe and Asia, such as European buckthorn, Japanese barberry, and Asian honeysuckle have taken over large swaths of the preserves, slowly destroying our native ecological communities, and making the public's visitation experience less enjoyable. Our wetlands are choked with invasive brush and trees. Our savannas and woodlands, once open and filled with hundreds of native species, are now overcrowded with trees and brush that threaten to destroy these natural systems.

When fire is restored to these ecosystems, native plant and animal communities quickly recover. Our dominant tree species, especially oaks, are "fire-adapted". That means they have natural means to survive fire and even encourage fire. Oak trees have bark that is fire-resistant, and a hefty root system that allows them to regrow even when subjected to an extreme fire. Oak leaves are highly flammable and help carry fire across the landscape. The smaller plants that live under oaks are also fire-adapted. They have most of their mass underground, safe from the effects of fire. The above-ground parts of the plant we see die off each fall provide fuel for fire. When fire carries across the landscape, the old stems are removed, nutrients are returned to the soils, and the ground is exposed to more light. This in turn stimulates plants to increase flowering, seeding, and growth, leading to a healthy system. Non-native plants are typically not fire-adapted and perish when subjected to fire.

Benefits of Prescribed Burns: Prescribed burns are an effective land management tool because it:

1. Provides benefits to all our natural plant communities (*wetlands, prairies, savannas, and woodlands*) such as removing old plant material, stimulating flowering and seeding, increasing light to the ground, and reducing overabundant tree and brush species.
2. Controls non-native plants such as buckthorn and honeysuckle that are so damaging to our preserves.
3. Provides the benefits listed above at a very low cost per acre, making it one of our most cost-effective management tools in the District's restoration-related activities.

Additional information about the history and benefits of prescribed burns can be found in [the USDA Forest Services-Controlled Burns](#) website.