



# Land Management Guidelines

## **I. Management Goals**

The Forest Preserves has an ambitious vision for accomplishing its mission to enhance the quality of life for the people of Cook County, by expanding and restoring the preserves through the Next Century Conservation Plan (2014). The 2015 Natural and Cultural Resources Master Plan (NCRMP) provides the guidance needed to implement the Next Century Conservation Plan's natural resource goals. The NCRMP also includes a natural and cultural resources framework for future land acquisition, recreation development, and capital improvement.

The Forest Preserves actively restores and maintains natural communities according to these principles:

- Conserve biodiversity in a variety of natural communities across its holdings, such as prairies, savannas, woodlands, forests, and wetlands
- Prioritize the protection of endangered species and habitats
- Assess suitable natural community targets based on a variety of factors, including historical information, native species present, soils, topography, hydrology, wildlife needs, and adjacent communities
- Maintain natural community maps of its holdings
- Consider the opinions of the community in the planning process

## **II. Management Plans**

The FPCC develops ecological management plans based on current research and natural community maps. Plans reflect best management practices recognized by the Forest Preserves, as informed by federal and state agencies, peer-reviewed scientific literature, academic research, the NCRMP, *Chicago Wilderness Biodiversity Recovery Plan (2001)*, the *Sustainability Doctrine (2010)*, the *Enabling Act (1913)*, field observations, and other relevant information. At sites with designated volunteer stewards or where other agencies work in partnership with the FPCC on grant-funded projects, these groups have a collaborative role in developing the ecological management plan in conjunction with Forest Preserves staff.

## **III. Forest Preserves Responsibilities**

The Forest Preserves oversees and reviews all ecological management projects and related activities conducted by staff, contractors, or in collaboration with volunteers and partners on Forest Preserves holdings. The staff's responsibilities include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Developing, implementing, and supervising ecological management plans and projects
- Recommending goals and strategies for Forest Preserves holdings



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- Working with federal, state, regional, and local governmental agencies on projects and activities in Forest Preserves holdings
- Developing and implementing ecological management policies, including re-vegetation, record keeping, work strategies, and other activities
- Pursuing additional resources to enhance ecological management, including grants, interns, and partnerships
- Reviewing grant proposals to ensure compatibility with Forest Preserves ecological management goals, priorities, strategies, and policies
- Evaluating requests to initiate new ecological management sites
- Reviewing requests for access to holdings for research
- Evaluating requests for sensitive information, such as locations of rare and endangered species

### **IV. Ecological Stewardship Volunteer Program**

Ecological stewardship volunteers working within the Forest Preserves are significant contributors to the goal of maintaining and restoring its natural communities. Volunteers work closely with Forest Preserves staff and perform activities that are part of the Forest Preserves' approved ecological management plans. Site Stewards are volunteers designated by Forest Preserves staff and named in management plans to be responsible for defined management activities at specific sites. The Forest Preserves trains and certifies stewardship leaders to supervise other volunteers. The Forest Preserves supports ecological stewardship volunteers in several ways, including the following:

- Ensures communication between Forest Preserves staff and volunteers via Volunteer Resources
- Works with volunteers on a regular basis and guides their activities
- Provides volunteers with the necessary equipment, materials, and identification to conduct workdays
- Develops and maintains an ecological stewardship volunteer handbook in collaboration with Volunteer Resources, other Forest Preserves staff, and ecological stewardship volunteers
- Certifies Site Stewards through the *Path to Stewardship Program (2013)*, which specifies the certification process, duties, and responsibilities of supervisory volunteers.

Ecological stewardship volunteers contribute to the Forest Preserves' goals in many ways. Accredited Site Stewards are supervisory volunteers with the following responsibilities:

- Assist Forest Preserves staff in supervising volunteer activities
- Supervise herbicide application, tree and brush removal, and the burning of brush piles by other volunteers
- Assist Forest Preserves Ecology staff with monitoring plant and animal communities
- Maintain and submit records of volunteer progress to Forest Preserves staff



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- Represent the Forest Preserves in a positive, professional manner
- Conduct all work activities in accordance with all Forest Preserves policies and federal, state, and local laws

### **V. Partnerships**

The Forest Preserves develops partnerships with federal, state, and other governmental and non-governmental organizations where such partnerships benefit and enhance the Forest Preserves' ecological management efforts and mission. The Forest Preserves works collaboratively with partner organizations to develop and implement sound ecological management projects. The Forest Preserves may develop Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) with partners to define the role and scope of partnerships.

### **VI. Public Information and Outreach**

The Forest Preserves distributes information and actively seeks public input regarding ecological management activities on Forest Preserves land. When practical, the Forest Preserves communicates with the public in the following ways:

- Notifies neighbors, community groups, public officials, and the media of upcoming activities such as prescription burns, brush cutting, and herbiciding
- Conducts public outreach at the onset of any major land management project

### **VII. Vegetation Management**

In the face of increasing urbanization, habitat loss, environmental pollution, and the introduction and spread of invasive species, the Forest Preserves must actively manage lands to ensure the preservation of irreplaceable natural resources. Prescribed burning, herbicide application, and other best management practices are used to control invasive plants and to enhance native biodiversity across Forest Preserves holdings.

#### *A. Prescribed Burning*

Fire is essential to the diversity and maintenance of natural communities of Cook County; it helps restore soil fertility through nutrient recycling, increases light availability to promote understory growth, helps control aggressive species, and enhances native seed germination. Federal and state agencies, accredited colleges and universities, and the Chicago Wilderness consortium endorse prescribed burning as a vital ecological management tool. The Forest Preserves safely conducts prescribed burns in urban and suburban areas by adhering to established guidelines and policies.



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- The Forest Preserves adopts as policy all State of Illinois laws and any future laws that regulate the use of prescribed burning. Prescribed burns are conducted in a manner that adheres to the State of Illinois Smoke Management Plan.
- The Forest Preserves periodically meets with municipal fire departments to ensure that the best fire management techniques for both prescribed burning and wildfire suppression are being used on Forest Preserves lands.
- Standardized training is required for all prescribed burn leaders and fire line crew members. The Forest Preserves recognizes training programs provided by the National Wildfire Coordinating Group and Chicago Wilderness Midwest Ecological Burn Crew Member Training. The Forest Preserves collaborates with other agencies to offer the most current training opportunities to staff and volunteers.
- Prescribed burns are conducted by Forest Preserves crews or contractors who meet training criteria established by the Forest Preserves. All Burn Bosses, either staff or contractor, are registered under the State of Illinois Certified Burn Manager Program. Contractors conducting burns work under the direction of Forest Preserves staff.
- Burn plans are developed for each site to achieve desired management goals and to maximize benefits to wildlife and natural communities. The Forest Preserves assesses sites before and after all prescribed burns. Forest Preserves staff and contractors submit standardized post-burn reports to the Department of Resource Management.
- The Forest Preserves notifies users of the preserves as well as other near-by entities. Signs are posted at the intended prescribed burn site to notify preserve users of the Forest Preserves' intent to burn.
- County Commissioners and municipal police and fire departments are notified of any prescribed burning to be conducted in their respective Forest Preserves.
- Burn crews remain on site until fire is determined to be safe from re-ignition.

### *B. Woody Vegetation Removal*

Over the last 40 years, in the absence of fire, an unnatural proliferation of woody undergrowth emerged and must be removed to increase light levels and to promote the growth of native plants. The District approves and supervises the removal of trees and woody brush according to the following:

- Forest Preserves staff, contractors, trained volunteers and conservation corps may remove trees 12 inches diameter at breast height (DBH) and smaller in accordance with approved management plans.
- Trees 12 inches DBH and larger may be removed by Forest Preserves staff or contractors on approval of the Forest Preserves where the tree is dead, diseased, a public hazard, or when part of a Forest Preserves-approved management plan.
- Woody debris and cut stumps will be left in a safe condition.
- Girdling (or frilling) of woody vegetation may be approved by the Senior Resource Ecologist. With the following considerations, including but not limited to; plant



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species, effectiveness of technique, follow-up plan, proximity to potential targets, land management concerns. The use of this tool shall be captured in the approved management plan.

### *C. Brush Pile Management*

The creation and burning of brush piles is an efficient way to dispose of debris resulting from the removal of woody vegetation. Brush piles are managed in a safe and ecologically sound manner, adhering to the following principles:

- All brush pile burning follows applicable federal, state, and local laws and Forest Preserves policies and procedures.
- Forest Preserves staff, contractors, Site Stewards, or interns notify local fire and police departments and other appropriate agencies and entities of brush pile burns.
- Care is taken in the construction, placement, and timing of brush pile burns to minimize impact on wildlife and native plants, including standing trees.
- Brush piles are placed to avoid damage to sensitive soils, such as peat, and areas with sensitive vegetation. Elevated burn platforms are used where necessary.
- Efforts are made to limit the size and number of burn scars in a given area; additionally, burn scars are reused as much as possible.

### *D. Herbicide Use*

Herbicide use can be a cost-effective and environmentally sound method to control invasive plant species. Invasive species disrupt natural communities and alter the natural processes that maintain them, resulting in a loss of habitat and, ultimately, biodiversity. Approved herbicides that have low environmental impact, as determined by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), are used with these additional guidelines:

- The Forest Preserves adopts as policy all federal and State of Illinois laws and any future laws that regulate the use of herbicides.
- Herbicides are applied only by state-licensed individuals under supervision of Forest Preserves staff or certified supervisory volunteers.
- Forest Preserves agents apply the lowest amount of herbicide to accomplish the management goal. Safety of the public, pets, native plants, soil microbiota, and wildlife are taken into account.
- Signage is displayed on sites where herbicides are being used in accordance with Forest Preserves ordinances, policies, and herbicide labels.
- Signage is displayed notifying the public of safe re-entry to areas following herbicide application. The EPA establishes safe re-entry times and this information can be found on every herbicide label.

### *E. Soil Conservation*



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Soils are a significant and valuable resource; they are the foundation of natural communities and serve critical ecological functions, including sustaining plant and animal growth, maintaining air and water quality, and supporting human health. Soil structure and quality are best preserved by protecting and restoring the native plant communities under which they formed. In addition to promoting a mosaic of native groundcover, recommendations from the Natural Resources Conservation Service to preserve soil quality are followed. Management activities on Forest Preserves lands are conducted in a manner that best conserves soils, with concern for several factors:

- Preventing erosion
- Preventing compaction
- Protecting the native seed bank

### *F. Re-vegetation*

Seeding and planting of native species follow Forest Preserves Seed Source Policy and Guidelines (2016), and the rules and guidelines established by the Illinois Endangered Species Protection Board and the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission where appropriate. Preservation of remnant gene pools is a priority when restoring native plant communities, balanced with the need for adequate plant community structure, diversity, and function. Natural communities with high diversity and genetic integrity are managed to restore the natural processes that maintain them. At times, due to past land use, native diversity has been diminished, and there is a need to introduce seeds and plants to restore the desired community.

### *H. Deer Overabundance*

Deer are an integral part of the forest preserves ecosystem and a popular animal for public viewing. However, overabundance of these animals leads to increased disease and disease transmission within the herd, increased deer-vehicle collisions, over-grazing of plants, causing a decrease in biodiversity, and aid in the spreading invasive species. The forest preserve recognizes the importance of managing the population of this animal to ensure a healthy ecosystem and for the wellbeing of the animals themselves.

### *G. Storm Water Management*

On-site and off-site storm water greatly impacts the management of natural communities in the Forest Preserves. Urban storm water can be toxic to aquatic organisms, degrade natural communities, and increases erosion, often gouging once-gentle waterways. Additionally, some invasive species flourish in the warm, salty waters that flow off impervious surfaces.



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Whenever possible, the Forest Preserves uses best management practices to minimize the amount of storm water that enters its natural areas.

### *H. Archaeological Sites*

There are approximately 1,200 archaeological sites recorded in Cook County and there may be hundreds more as less than 20% of the Forest Preserves have been systematically surveyed. Of what has been surveyed, the Forest Preserves contains 550 archaeological sites. Information collected from these sites indicates that people have been living in the Chicago region continuously for at least the past 10,000 years. The entire history of human occupation in Cook County is represented in the archaeological sites preserved within the Forest Preserves—from the first Paleoindian travelers who entered the area after retreat of the glaciers, to the German prisoners-of-war living in barracks on Forest Preserve property during WWII. The Forest Preserves recognizes the value of these cultural resources and will conserve them while managing the natural resources.

### **VIII. Forest Preserve Advisory Committee**

The President and the General Superintendent may, at their discretion, create a Forest Preserves review forum which would include representation from all Commissioners' Forest Preserves and be open to the public.

### **IX. Review**

This document shall be reviewed and updated periodically, not exceeding five (5) years. Additional resources may be found on [fpdcc.com/resources](http://fpdcc.com/resources).