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Prescribed Burn Planning Now Available

ALBUQUERQUE, NM-Mother Nature cooperated at the end of March 2009, enabling 28 New Mexico USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) employees to become certified as prescribed burn planners.

“This important service helps ranchers and other land managers to reap the benefits of improved rangeland throughout New Mexico,” said John Tunberg, NRCS range management specialist. “Land managers have learned that fire is an essential ingredient in improving and maintaining the health of rangelands in the American West.”

Generally, prescribed burns will reduce brush and trees that have a negative impact on grasslands. The ensuing grasslands improve the landscape’s ability to capture and hold water. A burn reduces fuel load, and, thus reduces the risk of a catastrophic wildfire. Also, while carbon is released during the burn, in the long term there is less risk of a much larger carbon release that could occur in the case of a catastrophic wildfire. And, most importantly, the improved forage benefits wildlife as well as livestock.

At the Trementine training site, 60 miles east of Las Vegas, New Mexico, the prescribed burn that was used as a demonstration in March reduced cholla, yucca, and junipers that were less than two feet tall. The training burn left a good mosaic which enhances the diversity of habitat for song birds.

The ranchers who attended the March event came away with the understanding that fire can be used in a controlled manner to get good results. They were most interested in the planning that went into the burn to do it right.

“To do it right there are a number of steps that go into creation of a sound prescribed burn plan,” said Tunberg.

First, the landowners objectives need to be clarified. The characteristics of the area and fuel load needs to be inventoried. Fuel breaks and ignition sequences must be planned, and the event must be organized with contacts made to the local fire department, state police, sheriff’s department, and surrounding landowners. Permits must be obtained and the weather must be right. These are all steps that were covered in the training.

As a result of the training, ranchers now have available to them 28 NRCS employees who are certified in prescribed burn planning. Further, NRCS hopes to support those ranchers who are interested in forming a Prescribed Burn Association such as exists in Oklahoma and Texas. Such an association can assist its members as they work the process and build better rangelands in New Mexico.

For further information about prescribed burns contact John Tunberg, NRCS range management specialist at (505)761-4488 or John.Tunberg@nm.usda.gov

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