Prescribed Burning as a Pasture Management Tool

Prescribed burning, using fire as a management tool in pastures, has become more widespread in recent years. Burning in the late winter and early spring is most common. This helps remove accumulated plant material and opens the canopy for new seedlings to emerge. This can be especially effective if pastures are over seeded with legumes such as red clover, where sunlight penetration into the canopy is important for seed germination. Burning is beneficial to a stand of native warm season grasses and can improve wildlife habitat as well.

Ideal conditions for burning include a moist soil, humidity of 30 to 60 percent, a temperature between 45-75 degrees and a wind speed of 10 to 15 miles per hour. A light wind helps move the fire across the field. Use of a backfire is critical to control the fire. A backfire is a small slow fire that is set on the downwind side of the field. This will help to stop the fire when it reaches the edge of the field. A fire break such as a mowed or tilled strip around the edge of the field is important to contain the fire in the desired area. To effectively stop the fire at the edge of the field, the fire break and the back fire combined should be 50 feet wide. Be aware that the smoke from the fire may be a hazard if it is blowing across a road or toward a home. A backpack sprayer or an ATV equipped with a sprayer can be used to wet areas along the backfire and to extinguish wooden fence posts if they begin to burn. A rake and a leaf blower are useful tools as well.

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