Prescribed Burning —

It's Your Right and Your Responsibility

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Landowners have been using fire as a land management tool for centuries. It's a great tool that produces multiple benefits, such as site preparation for reforestation, hardwood control in pine stands, wildfire hazard reduction, improved wildlife habitat, as well as threatened and endangered species management. But, with that right also comes responsibility.

Recently, 66 private landowners participated in a burn certification course, sponsored by the Alabama TREASURE Forest Association (ATFA), in partnership with the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Alabama Forestry Commission (AFC). The program, which was held on landowner Smokey Davis's property in Mobile County, included sessions on fire behavior, environmental effects of fire, and smoke management. Those who successfully completed the training became certified "Alabama Prescribed Burn Managers."

Photo courtesy of NRCS

Prescribed burning, when done properly, is a good management tool that can be beneficial to timber producers.

Prescribed burning is the deliberate use of fire under specified and controlled conditions to achieve a resource management goal. Hurricane activity in the past few years has put acres of timber on the ground in Alabama. Because of this debris, the fuel load in Alabama forests is extremely high in the Southern part of the state. At least 15-20% of the downed timber is not salvageable. Downed timber that was not salvaged after recent hurricanes has turned into a real fire hazard. A prescribed burn is one management tool that landowners can use to decrease the heavy fuel load.

This year ATFA, NRCS, and the AFC partnered to bring a burn certification school to the private

landowners – the people who own the land – so that they can become burn managers, capable of caring for the forest problems on their land. Routinely, the AFC offers this program once a year. While private landowners are welcome to participate, the participants have usually been "professionals" who conduct prescribed burns. However, because of the increased fuel load, the course was offered several times during 2006 with private landowners as the targeted participants. According to Louis Hyman, Assistant Division Director of the AFC's Fire Division, "The goal is to give landowners the tools they need to safely use fire in land management. The purpose of the course is to teach people how to do it right so that the fire and smoke will stay where they want them."

The overriding theme in prescribed burning should be safety and control. There are three issues to be considered when conducting a prescribed burn:

- How to keep the fire where it is supposed to be
- How to keep the smoke away from people
- How to keep the smoke away from smoke sensitive areas

The first step in a prescribed burn is to develop a plan – what is to be accomplished with the burn, what type material will be burned, how much area will be covered, where is the area located, how will the burn be conducted, and finally, what equipment is needed/available to conduct the burn. Every aspect of the burn should be planned well in advance to prepare fireguards, gather and repair equipment, organize labor, and obtain permits. Before the burn, the plan should be notarized or signed by witnesses. This is a legal precaution for the landowner.

Atmospheric conditions are extremely important in conducting a prescribed burn. As the burn plan is developed, these conditions will help the landowner determine when it is safe to burn. On the day of the burn, these conditions should be monitored closely.

State law requires that a landowner secure a permit from the Alabama Forestry Commission before burning any woodland, grassland, field, or new ground that is over ¼ acre in size or lies within 25 feet of natural fuels, such as woods or grass. There is no cost for the permit. The "permit" is really a notification so that the AFC will know *who* is burning *where*; when their fire spotters see smoke, they can determine if it is a controlled burn or a wild fire. In addition to notifying the AFC, common courtesy dictates that local fire departments and neighbors also be notified.

Photo courtesy of NRCS

Dr. John Mims, 86-year-old landowner, witnesses the fire plan on the controlled burn demonstration plot.

Those attending the ATFA burn certification course were a cross section of Alabama private landowners. There were young landowners as well as more experienced landowners – Dr. John Mims, an 86-year-old landowner from Colbert County was the oldest participant. Several women also participated in the course; some in order to be an informed member of a husband/wife team, and others as the primary landowner. No matter what the age or gender, they all had a common goal, and that was to become informed about the right way to conduct a prescribed burn.

There are many details involved in planning a prescribed burn. After attending the Alabama Prescribed Burn Manager Certification course, Alabama private landowners have a better understanding of how to do the process correctly.

Extension System/ Auburn University Announce LEADERS Class

Auburn University and the Alabama Cooperative Extension System announce plans for Class IX of the Alabama Agriculture and Forestry Leadership Development Program. Called "LEADERS" for short, the up-to-50 days of training is taken over two years and involves a half dozen or so sessions around the state and both national and international study tours. The target audience is up-and-coming adults 25 to 40 years of age who are involved in the state's food and natural resources industries. Objectives are to improve leadership skills, broaden appreciation for the greater industry, and better understand public policy issues.

The newest class of this unique executive development program is slated to begin early in 2007. Up to 30 individuals will be selected. For further information contact Dennis Evans at Auburn at 334.844.5552 or e-mail him at **evansda@auburn.edu**.