

Case Study:

Valuable Training for Volunteer Firefighters in Tabor, Iowa through Prescribed Fire Service

The advantages of periodic prescribed fire on Iowa grasslands have been well documented in recent years, and landowners are more willing to have their grasses burned. But there's a hitch; it doesn't seem to be getting any easier to find people to conduct the burns. That includes local volunteer fire departments, a source that would seem to be well suited to the task.

There are, however, a number of volunteer fire departments in Iowa that will give you more than half a dozen good reasons they're involved in helping landowners with prescribed fire. One of those departments is the Tabor Volunteer Fire Department in the southwestern part of the state.

"One of the most important reasons we offer prescribed burn services to landowners in our fire district is the training those burns offer to our crews," says Assistant Fire Chief David Carter. "The burns help us train new firefighters and give more experience in understanding fire to others in the department in non-emergency situations. That field training results in added safety when we have fire calls."

Carter also likes the added community service the department offers by conducting the burns. "This is improving the landscape, and offering a service to landowners they have difficulty finding from anywhere else. I really believe we're providing a needed service to the community," Carter says. "The main reason I joined the department was so we could offer more prescribed burns to the community."

The burns are also an excellent way to raise funds for the local volunteer department, Carter says. Each burn on land not in a government program brings in \$200 to \$500 in donations; the department charges for burns on grasslands in government programs, and depending on size of the grassland and complexity of the burn, those burns can result in considerably more reimbursement.

A survey of ten volunteer departments with active prescribed burn programs by Agren, Inc. found agreement with the Tabor department's reasoning, along with other advantages to offer a prescribed burn service. High on some department's list of reasons for burning was fewer emergency responses needed to fight out-of-control grass fires that had been lit by landowners. Others pointed out their service made it possible to get eager new volunteers into the field quickly to practice fire techniques--which was helpful in recruiting new volunteers. Still others found they could get grants from agencies like the Iowa Department of Natural Resources to economically purchase firefighting equipment they might not otherwise be able to own.

"In our case, most of the wild-fire equipment is relatively inexpensive, so our controlled burn income will pay for it. If we need something major, we will likely look for a grant to help fund it," Carter says.

Finally, since a number of local departments work with neighboring departments on prescribed fires, they see value in getting together in a non-

emergency fire situation to cooperate, exchange information, and learn from each other.

Advice Assistant Chief Carter would share with a department considering offering a prescribed burn service includes finding a detail-oriented person who is enthusiastic about doing prescribed burns. The person needs to be good with people and able to understand and operate equipment, too, he says. That's what the Tabor department found in Carter in 2005. He's led the charge to dramatically increase the number and acres of prescribed burns in the Tabor fire district in parts of Mills and Fremont Counties.

"The burns were infrequent for a long time, but they really picked up in 2007," Carter says. Last year, the Tabor department conducted prescribed burns on 320 acres with 13 separate burn units. A crew of 2 to 5 volunteers from the department is involved in most burns, drawing from about 25 volunteer firefighters in the department.

The time it takes to conduct a burn varies depending on the size and complexity of the landscape, Carter says. Average time is one to three hours, not counting prep time of the landowner. There's extra time to develop a burn plan, which usually falls to Carter. He can usually do those in less than half an hour.

The training the prescribed burns provide is helpful because many volunteers in the department have little training in fighting grass fires or wild fires. "We have a few members with S130/S190 basic training for wild-land firefighting that's needed by the USDA Forest Service and other federal agencies on public lands," Carter says. So the prescribed burns let those with training extend their knowledge to others in the department.

Since the prescribed burns take only a short time, a few people and little equipment, there's not much concern in the Tabor department that emergency fire calls won't be fully answered during a prescribed burn. "We only use our brush truck and rural tanker. We have another truck for responding to vehicle accidents and brush fires, and engines for structure fires. If able, we will keep the brush truck at the controlled burn and have one man take the tanker," Carter explains.

Insurance hasn't been an issue to this point, either. "We have a strong core of people who do a lot for the community here," Carter says. A strong advocate for the program, Carter sums up his feelings. "We do these prescribed burns spring, fall and winter, weather permitting. They're good for the community, and I hope to continue this for a long time."

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