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Burn Association Hosts Annual Meeting And Rolls Out Website

By Colleen Schreiber

SONORA — Some 150 members of the Edwards Plateau Prescribed Burning Association, members often referred to fondly as “pyromaniacs,” gathered here recently for the association’s annual meeting. At least one prescribed burn was scheduled for later in the week, and as much as they were itching to light a match, most were extremely pleased when rain started pouring from the heavens just as the formal program began. Before it was done, a little more than an inch had fallen, the first good rain in some months.

Established in 1997, EPPBA is a non-profit “developed to manage and restore the productivity and stability of Edwards Plateau, Texas, rangelands using a neighbor-help-neighbor prescribed fire cooperative.”

EPPBA is the pioneer burn association in the state, and is largely the brainchild of Dr. Charles “Butch” Taylor, superintendent of the Sonora Experiment Station. During the annual meeting, Taylor offered a brief history of the association as well as some philosophical thoughts on the importance of fire in managing the ecosystem and the contributions that associations like EPPBA are making to all of society.

“We have a lot to be proud of,” Taylor told EPPBA members. “We’ve accomplished a lot since 1997.”

EPPBA started with a mere 30 members; today membership has grown to more than 500 landowners from nine chapters scattered throughout the hill country and Edwards Plateau. Perhaps EPPBA’s greatest success is that nine other associations in the state have followed the group’s lead and others are in the works. And, it doesn’t stop at the Texas border. Taylor has traveled to several other states across the country, including Kansas, Oklahoma, Colorado, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota to tell EPPBA’s story and help others establish a burn cooperative.

“EPPBA empowers ranchers and equips them with the skills and the knowledge to manage ranchlands with fire,” Taylor said.

Since the first of the year, EPPBA has burned 7342 acres under prescription.

“That’s not near enough,” Taylor admitted. “We should be burning three times that.”

In a typical year the association will burn 50,000 acres. However, burn ban restrictions are still a problem for the association, particularly the

counties further east in the central part of the state. The two-year drouth has slowed their efforts as well.

Before prescribed burn associations came into being, the use of fire as a tool for managing rangelands, particularly in the Edwards Plateau, was limited at best. Back then, those who used prescribed fire as a management tool weren't often happy with the results. That's primarily because most were using winter burns or dormant season burns, and the prescriptions associated with that kind of burn, Taylor explained, simply weren't effective for killing prickly pear and cedar. The standard burn prescription early on was the "80-20-20 rule" — 80 degrees Fahrenheit, relative humidity not less than 20 percent, and windspeeds not more than 20 mph.

"That just doesn't work in our part of the world," Taylor reiterated. "Our soils are too shallow, we don't grow enough grass, and we need really hot fires to do any good with pear and juniper."

The more intense summer fires, however, were not only considered unsafe by agency personnel, but many researchers had long recommended against the use of summer fire, contending that such extreme fire could kill the native vegetation.

Taylor disputed such dogma. He began doing research on summer fires in the early 1980s, and he eventually gathered enough data to show that summer fires were effective in restoring a pear and cedar-infested rangeland back to the more native landscape; the native grasses did not die, but rather, with rain and proper grazing management came back like gangbusters. Furthermore, he showed that with proper training, summer fires could be done safely.

Taylor showed a picture of one of the many summer fires conducted by the association. Because this particular site had less than 1000 pounds of fine fuel, he explained that a very hot, intense fire was necessary for the landowner to meet his goals and objective. Thus, on this particular fire, the temperature was more than 100 degrees, relative humidity was less than 25 percent, wind speeds averaged 15 to 16 mph, and the one-hour lag time moisture was less than six percent.

"The headfire immediately jumped up in the canopy cover of that cedar," Taylor said. "We were cooking that cedar and melting that prickly pear. We were doing some good with this fire. That's what EPPBA has always been about — meeting the goals and objectives of the landowner and making sure we do it in a safe and effective manner."

He also pointed out that Texas rangelands evolved with periodic summer fire. Some fires were intentionally set; others were set by lightning strike, for example.

"We grow the bulk of our warm season perennial grasses by August," Taylor noted. "August is usually characterized by hot, dry weather, and that also corresponds with peak lightning strikes. So nature has built in a fire regime in this state, and it is a hot, dry, summer fire regime that

occurs naturally and has occurred naturally for tens of thousands of years.”

The point Taylor was getting around to again was that hot summer fires don't kill vegetation because fire is a natural part of the landscape and that vegetation is well adapted to hot, intense fire.

“We're going to have fire one way or another,” he stressed. “We can use prescribed fire to manage these fuel loads or we can allow the wildfires to do it for us.”

Turning to the broader picture, Taylor noted that managing the state's fuel loads through the use of prescribed fire potentially saves the state millions of dollars because fewer dollars then have to be spent fighting wildfires. He used the 2005-2006 fire season, which was considered by the Texas Forest Service to be one of the worst wildfire years on record, as an example of what possibly could have been prevented.

“The fire response alone cost the state \$80 million, and there were 20 lives lost to these wildfires,” Taylor told listeners. “As a taxpayer, I ask who is asleep at the wheel. Why are we spending so much money in this state on fire suppression instead of spending money to be proactive by controlling these fuels? And then, how in the heck do we lose 20 people?”

“Anytime we do a prescribed fire, we're managing fuels and improving the safety in these rural areas,” he stressed. “Unfortunately, many of our politicians don't recognize that.”

Taylor chastised not only state and county officials but also fellow state agencies.

“There is absolutely no leadership in the state of Texas, at the agency level, when it comes to managing fuels. The only people who are managing fuels in the state of Texas are the landowners who are doing prescribed fires on their land.”

Taylor pointed out that the number of livestock grazing rangelands today is far fewer than it once was. In fact, many of the newer absentee landowners don't graze any livestock.

“We used to keep the landscape fireproofed with large numbers of livestock,” Taylor said. “Today we're growing and accumulating fuel in the state like we've never before, at least not since the development of the livestock industry.”

Reduction of hazardous fuel loads, he told listeners, should be the first priority outlined in every burn plan.

“Texas is not a soft, green landscape,” he reiterated. “This is a country of extremes, and when it gets dry we get wind, and if a wildfire gets started it can be a rip-snorter, so we have to do a better job of managing these fuels so these wildfires are not as damaging.”

These days, drouth is heavy on the minds of those who ranch in

Central and South Texas, and while the ever-changing weather pattern is not something landowners have any control over, Taylor reminded listeners that using prescribed fire as a tool to manipulate the rangeland to change it from a closed canopy of cedar to a mixed grass and shrubland makes the rains more effective when they finally come. And that, he stressed, not only benefits the landowner, but all citizens of the state.

“So not only are we using fire to improve livestock carrying capacity, to improve wildlife habitat, we’re also increasing biodiversity, increasing water availability, and improving the overall health of our natural resources. And we’re making it safer for everyone.”

But that’s not all. EPPBA, Taylor pointed out, is creating what he calls a “fire culture” by introducing and educating the younger generation on the importance of fire.

“My generation did not have that fire culture,” he noted. “We were taught that fire was harmful and dangerous. Today we have children participating on some of these prescribed burns. They won’t have to be convinced that they have to burn when they take over ownership of the land.”

Burn bans remain an issue for many landowners, and in some counties even those landowners who are members of burn associations are often still banned from conducting prescribed fires during a burn ban. That’s why Taylor encouraged EPPBA members to take the extra step to become a private certified burn manager. That certification allows them to burn whenever they choose, no matter if there is a burn ban or not.

To qualify, applicants must attend a pre-approved certified prescribed burn manager course. The additional field requirements include 30 days of participation in prescribed fires, and they must be fire boss on five fires. Certified prescribed burn managers must also carry a minimum of \$1 million of liability insurance, and a policy period minimum aggregate of at least \$2 million.

On the matter of insurance, Doug Rigdon, an insurance representative who was also on the program, voiced some concern about volunteers who help neighbors or other members of a burn association conduct a burn not being covered under the landowner’s liability policy.

Taylor, however, pointed out that because EPPBA is a 501-3C non-profit organization, it falls under the Charitable Immunity Act of 1987, which reads in part that “... the purpose of this act is to reduce the liability exposure and insurance cost to these organizations and their employees and volunteers in order to encourage volunteer services and maximize the resources devoted to delivering these services.”

“As a volunteer you should be covered,” he told listeners.

However, he added that he has asked the lawyers at the Texas Department of Agriculture to look into this further. TDA is the agency under

which the Prescribed Burn Board is housed. He also encouraged landowners to check their insurance policy to see just how much they're covered for and under what conditions they're covered.

Finally, Taylor talked briefly about the grant EPPBA received earlier this year from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The agency actually contacted EPPBA, not the other way around, and Taylor was quick to point out that there are no strings attached to the money.

"They're interested in stimulating the use of prescribed fire on private lands. They have come to realize that they have to work with landowners," Taylor said. "They're not telling us how to burn; instead, they're going with the idea that any kind of burn is good for wildlife habitat."

Taylor made a special request that some of the grant money be used for developing a new website for EPPBA, which is now up and running. Graduate student Dirac Twidwell provided an overview of its capabilities.

The new website located, at www.prescribedfirenetwork.com/eppba, he told listeners, serves many functions, but one of the primary functions is as a warehouse, so to speak, whereby data on all the prescribed fires the association conducts year in and year out can be accumulated and compiled. That data can then be used to prove up the association's track record on safety and effectiveness. More important, perhaps, Twidwell said the data can also be used as an educational tool for policymakers and the general public on the use and importance of prescribed fire as a means to care for and manage natural resources.

The website is designed as a fire network with the idea that other burn associations, not only in the U.S. but throughout the world, can link with EPPBA under the umbrella of this network; in that way all parties can share their data.

Information is power, Taylor reminded, and if prescribed fire is to be maintained as a critically important management tool for protecting and restoring the world's native rangelands, burn associations such as EPPBA must take a leading role in the education process.

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