



United States Department of Agriculture
Forest Service

NEWS RELEASE

Dakota Prairie Grasslands

For Immediate Release

Date: April 29, 2010

For more information, contact: Sharon Small

Phone: (701) 250-4443

Sheyenne National Grassland gets fired up

LISBON, ND – Smoke rising from the Sheyenne National Grassland could be seen for several miles as the U.S. Forest Service conducted prescribed burns over a 10-day period. Federal, state, and local fire specialists assisted in the burning of over 3,000 acres to encourage a healthy natural environment.

“We use fire as a way to re-establish a natural ecosystem on the Sheyenne,” says District Ranger Bryan Stotts. Stotts says that using controlled burns at the right times can have several benefits. “These prescribed burns are designed to increase the quantity and quality of livestock and wildlife habitat. They also reduce hazardous fuel like leaf litter and dead grass and trees, which in-turn reduces the chance of future wildfires.”

The reduction of leaf litter and undergrowth can actually prevent a catastrophic wildfire by eliminating flammable fuels and revealing natural fire breaks such as sand dunes and low-lying wet areas. A controlled, low-intensity burn protects established trees and gives a growth advantage to native plants species like wildflowers and long-rooted prairie grasses.

“Fires on the prairie are natural,” Stotts says. “Fire, in a carefully controlled situation, is an important and useful land management tool.”

Over 35 fire specialists assisted in the prescribed burning. The U.S. Forest Service, of which the Sheyenne National Grassland is a part, developed burn plans outlining the specific guidelines and requirements to get the most safely effective results. Prescribed burns are tightly controlled events with all partners working closely together under the guidance of a “burn boss.” Smokejumpers from the Missoula Smokerjumper Base were brought in for their experience and support. Other partners included the Lisbon Fire Protection District, The Nature Conservancy - Brown Ranch, and the North Dakota Forest Service.

“Logistically, these burns are always a challenge,” says U.S. Forest Service Assistant Fire Management Officer and Burn Boss, Oscar Knudtson. “With the amount of support we had, we were able to split into two teams to burn four units a day for two days. With partners, like the Lisbon Volunteer Fire Department, we were able to provide some training for them as well as gain additional support for us. They really are a pleasure to work with.”

Eleven ignitions were held in ten areas over the span of seven days on the Sheyenne. Ideally, the tallgrass prairie should be burned once every three to five years. The last couple of years have limited burning due to high water tables and wet conditions. Weather is a critical component of fire behavior; the temperature, relative humidity, and wind all play a part in how the fire will burn. If conditions are not favorable for a safe prescribed burn, the US Forest Service will postpone or cancel the fire. Conditions were good this spring for burning on the Sheyenne.

“It’s really greening up fast,” says Stotts. “Another week and everything would have been too green to burn.”

Before a prescribed fire is lit, specialists mowed fire breaks around the area and monitor wind and weather conditions closely. Dead trees or tall grasses are cut to prevent crossover of the fireline, and safety zones are identified. Once the fire is set, usually by drip torch, the fireline is continuously monitored throughout the life of the fire.

This year, smokejumpers from the Missoula Smokejumper Base in Missoula, Montana, assisted in the prescribed burn on the Sheyenne National Grassland. These specially-trained, U.S. Forest Service fire specialists’ primary job are to suppress wildfires in remote mountainous regions of the western United States. They also assist in prescribed burning operations throughout the United States.

The 70,000-acre Sheyenne National Grassland is part of the Dakota Prairie Grasslands Unit of the U.S. Forest Service. It is located approximately 30 miles south and west of the Fargo/Moorhead area. The Sheyenne National Grassland lies in the tallgrass prairie ecosystem, one of the rarest in the country. It hosts approximately 40 sensitive species, and 850 plant species of the 1,200+ species found in North Dakota. It is the only place the federally endangered Western Prairie Fringed Orchid is found in North Dakota.

For more information on the Sheyenne National Grasslands, contact the District Ranger’s office at (701) 683-4342, or visit online at www.fs.fed.us/r1/dakotaprairie/index.shtml.

