

# Conservation Conversation

Official Newsletter of the Barber County Conservation District

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## Banker's Award Winners

### Gary & Emma Jo Rucker

Congratulations to Gary and Emma Jo Rucker, recipients of the Banker's Conservation Award this year in recognition of their efforts in grasslands conservation. Upon taking over the ground, they recognized that work needed to be done to improve the condition of the grass.



So in 2006, Gary and Emma Jo signed up for assistance through the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks, focusing first on removing the trees. They also signed up for the EQIP through NRCS. EQIP was used to supplement the tree removal being completed with KDWP, help with prescribed burning, as well as to develop additional live-stock water sources, and the installation of cross fences. Once the fence was built and the water developed, Gary and Emma Jo were able to start a rotational grazing system.

The brush was accomplished over a few years, and involved mechanical clipping and sawing, then grinding of tree carcasses to remove them from the landscape. There was also some hand-work involved. While there are still more trees present, and those will be worked on in the future, the uplands are now free from vertical structures, providing excellent upland wildlife habitat. The Rucker's have recognized the importance of using burning as a tool that when done at the proper time, will remove the smaller cedars, as well as to improve the condition of the grass.

One of the first projects when Gary and Emma Jo took over was to take advantage of the dry weather and clean out the 5 ponds on the property, which combined with the removal of trees, has helped the ponds keep up with demand for most of the year. They have also noticed an increase in spring activity on the property, and hope to continue to develop water by either developing a spring or drilling a well.

From a grazing management standpoint, the Ruckers run cow-calf pairs on a short-season basis. The pairs come off usually around July 15, which gives the native warm-season grasses plenty of late-season rest.

Congratulations again, and good work implementing these conservation measures on your ground.

### Mark Schrock

Congratulations to Mark Schrock and family, recipients of this year's Conservation Banker's award for their active involvement in the reduction of soil erosion and promotion of more sustainable Ag practices.



Mark served as a professor at Kansas State University in the Biological

and Agricultural Engineering department, while continuing with the farming operations, starting back around 1975. Sometime in the mid 1980's, they began to "tinker" with different crop rotations. The development and refinement of technologies, like Roundup, for example, allowed the Schrock's to try some different crops. Crop rotation has had several benefits, including better weed control, less risk by diversifying the crop types, and allowing for a more profitable operation. Prior to crop rotation, several tillage passes were made in order to control the weeds, but afterwards, chemical control was effective, with an occasional disking operation still necessary. The Schrock's basic crop rotation is a wheat, then double-crop grain sorghum, and then full-season beans. However, there is a lot of flexibility in this rotation depending on various conditions (market, moisture, etc.), occasionally using double-crop beans, or corn, cotton. But it all boils down to getting 3 harvests in 2 years - something not possible before rotation. Mark stated that soybeans were the main driver in converting their farm over to no-till. The soybeans have worked out nicely for the Schrock's, not only providing an opportunity to break up the weed cycle, and providing a free source of nitrogen for the subsequent crop, but in fact this year, the double-cropped soybeans out-yielded the wheat. This was a first, and is especially impressive considering the hot dry summer we had.

Mark stated that the decision to switch to no-till should be a conservation-driven decision firstly, but appreciates that there are many other benefits as well. Wind erosion losses from the Schrock farm have nearly been eliminated completely, and water erosion has been greatly reduced as well, although there are some instances where other control measures need to be put in place. Other benefits are improved soil health, better moisture conservation, and a healthier bottom line.

Once again, congratulations to Mark Schrock and family.

## Were Bagworms On Your Windbreak Last Year?

If the answer is yes, you need to be ready to control them this year. After this cold winter we may see a lighter infestation but many will survive and control measures will be necessary to protect your windbreak or landscape plantings. Each bag hanging on your trees can have several hundred eggs. Bagworms will hatch from mid May through June in South Central Kansas. If you will mark your calendar to check the last week of May you can start looking early for the little tiny worms as they are hatching and spreading by blowing in the wind on silk threads. Once you have discovered the little bagworms you will be able to spray early and have a much better chance of eliminating them from your windbreak or landscape plantings. Two applications are usually needed applied about two to three weeks apart. For good control you need to spray before they reach 1 inch long and be sure to cover the entire plant for control. If you had damage last year on your plantings they can recover but to do so you will need to eliminate the bagworms this year so the new growth is protected and can grow to cover or replace that which was lost during last year's growing season. Fertilizing damaged plants this spring as new growth appears may help encourage additional new growth.

Your local extension office has a great pamphlet on Bagworms and their control complete with a list of insecticides that work.

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## Wildflower Tour

Every year on Mother's Day weekend we meet at the Medicine Lodge High School to begin a fun filled day exploring nature's wonderful wildflowers. While enjoying a continental breakfast of cinnamon rolls, fresh fruit, juice, and coffee we will view a slide show of the glorious flora of Barber County. After breakfast, we're off to the first identification stop where our expert guides will educate tour goers on the splendor of Barber County's wildflowers. After a delicious lunch and a chance to relax a little, we head back out on the range for another gaze at nature's wonders. This year's tour is scheduled for May 7. The price of the tour is \$15 which includes a continental breakfast, lunch, an afternoon snack, and transportation to at least two sites. Be sure to check out our Wildflower Tour T-Shirts! We have five different designs available for purchase. Also check out our various books for sale on the wildflowers of Kansas.



*Blue Spiderwort on the 2010 Wildflower Tour*

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## John Farney Memorial Scholarship

*The John Farney Memorial Scholarship is a \$1000 scholarship sponsored by the Barber County Conservation District. The scholarship is awarded annually to a student who is entering at least his/her second year of college. Applicants must be pursuing a college degree in a conservation-related field. The applicant must also be a resident of Barber County. The deadline for applications is March 31, 2011. Applications are available at the conservation office, 800 W. 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue, Medicine Lodge, Kansas. You may also call (620) 886-5311 ext. 3 for more information.*

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## Cost Share Sign-Up

*Applications for the FY 2012 Water Resources Cost-Share Program (WRCSP) and Non-Point Source Pollution Control Program (NPS) will be accepted April 1-30, 2011. Approved practices include waterway construction, grass seeding, pasture and hayland seeding, livestock water developments, ponds, terraces, pipe outlets, erosion control structures, and windbreaks. All applications will be ranked according to priority of the resource concern. Funding will become available July 1. Remember, all projects must be approved for funding prior to beginning. Applications for cost-share assistance through the Non-Point Source Pollution Control Program (NPS) will also be accepted during the April sign-up period. Approved practices for this program include repair of failed septic systems, abandoned water well plugging, and livestock waste management. As in all cost-share programs, a project must receive approval before it can be started.*

# Prescribed Burn Workshop

On Thursday, February 17<sup>th</sup>, a crowd of 41 area producers and agency personnel gathered at Kiowa for a Prescribed Burning Workshop. Representatives from Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks, Conservation District, Farm Service Agency, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Kansas State University, and the National Weather Service were in attendance and gave presentations on various topics related to prescribed burning.

The many reasons for using prescribed burning as a tool to improve rangeland were covered; specifically citing: controlling invasive brush, improve grazing distribution, reduction of wildfire risks, improving wildlife habitat, and leading to increased gains on stockers. The proper timing to carry out a burn will depend on the reason and goal of the burn that you want to conduct. For example, if you would like to bring out more forbs to increase the brood-rearing and food supply for upland birds, an early spring burn would be beneficial. To improve the condition and productivity of warm-season grasses, schedule your burn for when the new growth on those warm-season species is 1-2 inches.

The Kansas Flint Hills Smoke Management Plan was presented, along with a discussion on the importance of producers being diligent about managing the smoke from their fires in order to lessen the negative effects on air quality and hopefully prevent tighter regulations on conducting burns. For more information on the Kansas Flint Hills Smoke Management Plan, please visit <http://www.ksfire.org/>.

The Barber County Burn Regulations and rules for completing the Conservation Reserve Program requirements were reviewed, followed by a discussion on liability. Some of the key points on liability were to ask specific questions when it comes to insurance and whether or not you're covered to burn on your ground, and if you help your neighbors, are you covered at that point as well. Keep in mind that there are several burn contractors who do prescribed burning in our area, most of whom are bonded themselves. Please visit

<http://www.barbercountyconservationdistrict.com/Contractor-s-List.html> for a list of contractors that have requested to be listed in this region.

Weather has perhaps the most influence over the behavior and success (or failure) of a prescribed burn. An unexpected change in weather when you're in the middle of the burn is a situation that no one wants to find themselves in. Temperature, humidity, and wind greatly influence a burn, and it is critical to have the best information available when planning your next burn. The National Weather Service gave an informative presentation of the tools that everyone has access to. Some of the helpful tools to pay attention to are: an hourly weather graph (easy-to-read chart showing wind, temperature, humidity, transport winds, etc), the Fire Weather Planning Forecast, and the Rangeland Fire Danger Index. You can get to these tools at: <http://www.crh.noaa.gov/ddc/?n=firewx>.

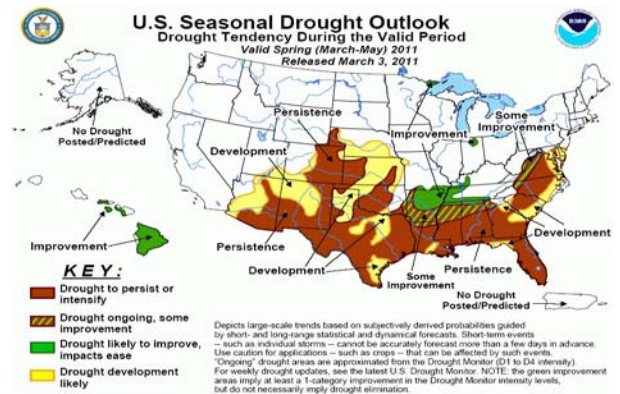
The day wrapped up with an overview on the types of equipment used in conducting a burn, considerations for using each type of equipment, some techniques on how to implement the burn, and then a hands-on activity with a sandbox. A "field" was set up in each sand box, and the group planned how to carry out the burn with considerations for wind directions, hazards, where to use backfires, how to run the ignition lines, etc.

The goal of the Workshop was to provide information on how to carry out a successful and safe prescribed burn. There is much more information than could be shared in a 4.5 hour meeting (let alone a 600-word write up), but thankfully there are a lot of resources available to you. NRCS has personnel that can develop a burn plan for you (but please come in long before you plan to do the burn), or print off maps that are critical to safely conducting a burn. KSU Extension has numerous publications on burning, and again, the National Weather Service has some very useful products available for planning. Equipment-wise, the Barber County Conservation District has 2 drip-torches available for rent. You should also ask KDWP about what equipment is available for burning.

Please follow all rules and stay safe!



BCCD Supervisor Matt Cantrell illustrating his planned burn for his farm this spring.



Map Courtesy of NOAA

# Smoke Management Plan Approved

The Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE) and more than 80 stakeholders recently approved the Flint Hills Smoke Management Plan (SMP) to reduce the air pollution impacts from spring agricultural burning.

The Flint Hills region of Kansas is the largest tract of unplowed tallgrass prairie in North America and one of the few large areas of native prairie remaining in the United States. Fire is an important management tool utilized to prevent the encroachment of trees and woody plants into the stand of prairie grass, as well as providing a positive impact to livestock gains and maintaining the economic stability of the region. For the benefits of fire as a rangeland management tool to be realized, burning must be initiated at the proper time. Burning of the tallgrass prairie generally occurs in early to mid-April. This has led to an increased interest in the air quality, not only in Kansas, but throughout the United States during the time frame in which the majority of prescribed burning activities occur.

## Key Elements of the Flint Hills SMP:

- Voluntary measures to reduce emissions from prescribed burning of rangeland in the counties of the Flint Hills
  - A Web site with a predictive, decision-making tool for producers and local fire officials
  - A comprehensive fire-data collection effort to characterize prairie burning including ambient-air monitoring, use of satellite imagery, and a post-burn season survey
  - Restrictions on open burning during April, but allows for agricultural burning related to the management of prairie or grasslands and Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) burning activities in affected counties (case-by-case exceptions may be granted by local fire officials or KDHE)
  - Extensive outreach and education efforts, including booklets, pamphlets, and media exposure
- KDHE encourages ranchers and interested parties to participate in implementing the Flint Hills SMP in several different ways, that include the following:
- Opportunities to participate in developing a regulation restricting non-prairie burning during April in certain counties
  - Attend a prescribed-fire training program
  - Pass on information to friends, neighbors, and local officials
  - Provide input and feedback on the web site, tools, and fire management practices, and
  - Supply burn information to your local fire official for the data collection effort

According to Eric B. Banks, state conservationist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the importance of working together to implement a voluntary plan of this sort should not be overlooked by anyone who has an interest in maintaining and preserving the grasslands of our state. While many may think the burning of these acres provides benefits related only to livestock production, the truth is without fire we would lose the many benefits provided by these vast expanses of grassland. The tallgrass prairie provides a home for many species of wildlife that coexist with fire and good rangeland management. The acres of grassland enable rainfall to soak into the soil instead of running off. While those who live in and around this region see these benefits firsthand, they must also realize the effect of smoke on others. It is the intent of this plan to benefit both groups while providing for the preservation of the tallgrass prairie ecosystem.

For more information and copy of the plan visit: [www.kdheks.gov/bar/air-monitor/flinthills.html](http://www.kdheks.gov/bar/air-monitor/flinthills.html)

If you would like assistance with prescribed burn planning, please contact your local county USDA Service Center.



# Improving Your CRP for Wildlife!

By Caleb Papenhausen, Wildlife Biologist, Pheasants Forever/Quail Forever

Have you ever wanted to improve wildlife habitat on your property? For hunting?, For viewing? To give something back? Many of you are sitting on a veritable gold mine of wildlife habitat in the form of your CRP acres. The conservation reserve program or CRP for short has taken on many forms from sign-up to sign-up, some more wildlife friendly than others. Even with all of the rules and stipulations of the program these days, there is still an amazing amount of flexibility within the program to improve the benefits it provides to wildlife. I strongly encourage you to go beyond the minimum requirements of the program if you want to see maximum wildlife benefits and the following are a few suggestions.

## What should we be aiming for?

*More frequent disturbance* – The prairie in this neck of the woods saw disturbance on average every 3-5 years, but old CRP contracts may have never seen disturbance. Even today, depending on your practice, CRP only requires 1 management practice in a 10 year contract. However, there is nothing in the rules preventing producers from doing additional management practices during the contract lifespan and you can even get cost-share for doing so! Just remember to let the USDA office know before doing anything not in your contract.

*Keeping Forb (weeds, non-woody flowering plants) abundance and diversity high* – High forb abundance and diversity yields high insect abundance and diversity, the life blood of many wildlife young. One specific example would be the Northern bobwhite Quail chicks. The diet of a quail chick consists of 90% insects in the first six weeks of life. The goal is to have at least 10 species out there at all times (prairies had much more than this historically), this will assure different color, structure, flowering during all seasons, and forbs flourishing in different weather years. CRP does not require 10 or more species on anything but CP25, but all contracts have the ability to have as many out there as your heart desires (or pocket book can withstand). And you can get cost-share for inter-seeding more forbs into your CRP acres.

*Creating and maintaining interspersions* – I know I know, interspersions is an unfamiliar word, but an important one to understand nonetheless. In this case, it simply means you want to have variable habitats within one CRP contract (or on the landscape as a whole). One way to achieve this on your CRP contract is to rotate your management practices. The most common way I've seen this done is to burn 1/3 of the contract acres at a time so that you have areas that are recently burned, areas 1-2 years removed from fire and some that are 3+ years removed. Again, this strategy is completely allowable and cost-shareable under the rules of CRP, but you need to consult with your USDA office beforehand.

## Management options and their strengths/weaknesses

Depending on your contract practice there are several options available for managing your CRP. I would also recommend mixing up your management efforts as some strategies are better at some things while others are better at promoting something else.

*Burning*- perhaps the most beneficial and efficient as it removes thatch (built up dead grass) keeps trees at bay, reinvigorates grass, and if done at the right time...can stimulate forb growth. If you have restricted burn windows of April only, burning alone often does not do a good job at stimulating forb growth by itself at this time of year. Some form of soil disturbance is needed in conjunction with it.

*Grazing* – grazing's most beneficial element would be the soil disturbance from the hoof action of the cattle. However, if you have lots of thatch built up, you will likely not see the benefits from the cattle's hoof action. A practice that removes thatch (burn) in the previous year or two is often a good combination.

*Disking* – great at creating soil disturbance and stimulating forb growth. Because of the mechanical nature of this practice, it's a good option for creating the soil disturbance through thatch heavy cover with multiple passes. I would still encourage removing thatch in the year or two or three prior to this practice as it will allow more sunlight to reach the soil further stimulating forb growth. On the downside, it does a better job of spreading noxious weeds than grazing does. So, if you have wide spread noxious weeds, disking should be avoided.

*Inter-seeding* – This can be a more expensive practice in the short-term, but less expensive in the long term. Part of many contracts is maintaining a certain level of forbs, and seeding additional forbs half way through your contract is a great way to make sure you have them out there for the entire duration of the contract. This is probably the most assured way to increase forb abundance and diversity on your CRP plot. As a CRP management practice, some form of site-prep will need to occur (likely burning or disking), so it is a two for one practice too. Depending on your county, cost-share will be provided for buying the seed, the site-preparation, and the act of drilling the seed.

## In conclusion

Often times we view CRP as a "set it and forget it" program, and in comparison to farming a poor soil site, it still is even with extra management efforts. At the end of the day even if you spend a couple of days every year managing your CRP, you will have been paid handsomely for those couple days of work via your annual rental payments. I encourage you to spend those days improving your CRP's wildlife potential. If you have further questions, feel free to shoot me your questions.

Caleb Papenhausen

Farm Bill Wildlife Biologist

Pheasants Forever/Quail Forever

[cpapenhausen@pheasantsforever.org](mailto:cpapenhausen@pheasantsforever.org)

[caleb.papenhausen@ks.usda.gov](mailto:caleb.papenhausen@ks.usda.gov)

620-886-5311 ext.110