

News Column

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RAINING SMOKE

Last Wednesday is the first time I have ever encountered rain that smelled like smoke. I remember a time when a spring snow turned my vehicle red, so I suppose it is the same principle in action. In that case, it had been dry and windy in Oklahoma and plenty of their red dirt was in the air over Kansas when we were blessed with a late spring snow.

The snow captured the dust on the way down and deposited it on our cars. It was a mess, but kind of a cool event.

I was thankful last week when Wednesday evening's rain cleansed the air. The previous two days had been especially good days for safe range burning. However, they hadn't been especially good days for dispersing the smoke.

My kids and I never did agree about whether the evening clouds we saw Monday and Tuesday were rain clouds or smoke clouds. I voted smoke and I still think I was right. Wednesday, ...maybe not. I still thought it was a cloud of smoke off to the west when I was getting rained on while doing chores. But,...I may have been wrong.

I know not everyone will agree with me, but I just consider smoke to be an unfortunate by-product of good range management. It's kind of like the smell of manure that is noticeable when feedlots get wet in the spring and fall. Or, like dust coming out of a combine during wheat or milo harvest. Nobody particularly likes it, but it comes with the territory.

Throughout the Flint Hills, and surrounding area, fire is an established range management

practice used by nearly all serious ranchers and land managers. It's not just a habit, and not just for fun – it's only fun when it doesn't get away – but a practice used to keep pastures clean and in pristine condition.

There are many benefits of range burning, with the most noticeable being cedar tree control. A fire every three to four years will keep cedar trees in check, burning them when they are still small enough to char clear to the ground instead of leaving a carcass.

Pastures left un-burned for 10 years will often be infested with sizeable cedar trees that can't be completely controlled with a single burn. And, pastures that aren't burned for 20 years, or more, will have trees 15 to 20 feet tall that are either dangerous to burn, or will need to be removed mechanically (with a chainsaw or a tree shear on a skid loader).

Some would argue that trees make great wildlife habitat. I have to agree that trees make great hiding places for big bucks. I even own a small wooded piece of land in western Kansas that rattles when I get near it. Wildlife movement. Deer and turkeys. But there's nothing for them to eat in the trees. They graze in the fields nearby – my own fields.

I don't mind a few trees in the draws, and I like them along the creeks to help control erosion. However, I'm not a fan of cedar trees. When cedars invade the good upland open areas, then they need to be controlled.

I guess that's a long enough cedar tree rant. What about other benefits of controlled burning?

Next on my list is brush control. Sometimes herbicides will be needed to help with brush control, but fire will often keep unwanted woody plants in check. It might need to be an every year fire, and it might have to be done in April, but it can work.

Controlled burning is also used as a fire prevention tool. Those pastures with huge cedars

are a real fire hazard, if a wildfire ever gets into them. Controlling the trees with fire on a calmer day is a better option than just hoping they never catch fire.

Land managers also use fire to enhance wildlife habitat, to stimulate tillering of desired grass species, to improve grazing distribution, and to improve livestock gains.

Like some of you, I'm not especially fond of the smoke. However, I think the benefits outweigh the challenges. I like the way fire keeps the Flint Hills beautiful and productive. I like the idea that the land will continue to be useful if we take care of it.

I like that I can raise more beef on well-kept, high quality rangeland.....

And, I like to eat.

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmcclure@ksu.edu.

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