

Maynard Johnson, Spring 2018

Burn day has finally arrived. I've bossed a few burns before, but it's still novel enough that there's a nervous excitement when I awake. But there's also a concern that the burn may have to be postponed or even canceled. Yesterday was a red flag day – dry conditions and very windy – and a burn ban was in effect. I call the number to activate the burn permit and am relieved to hear that with calm winds predicted for today, the ban has been lifted. But because of the continued dry conditions, I know there's still danger of the fire getting out of control. Am I ready to do this? Is it safe?

Ninety percent of the work involved in a prairie burn is done before burn day. Last fall I rented a tall grass mower to cut my burn breaks. Most of our 7-acre prairie needs burn breaks due to adjacent woodlands or corn stubble fields. The grass was tall and thick in some spots, while other areas adjacent to woods was more raspberry canes and volunteer aspen. After returning the rental mower, I raked up what I could and plopped it into the prairie, away from the break.

The tall grass mower is just the first pass. It's not very efficient at cutting the finer grasses, and the cutting deck cannot cut the grass as short as I want. I wait a few days to let the grass recover from the initial mowing so it's not quite so matted down. I then use my walk-behind mower to cut the grass as low as is practical. The gopher mounds make it hard going at times. Arrrgh! Now, the mowing is done, but the clippings are very thick in places, and leaving them could make for a “fuzzy” burn break that has too much dry combustible matter. So ... more raking.

After a long winter, spring finally arrives. It's time to make the rest of the burn preparations. From the Prairie Smoke website, I find the required steps for doing a burn and follow them to the letter, emailing my burn plan and waiver form and reserving equipment. I send out an email to twice as many potential volunteers as I need and am happy to get positive replies from almost all of them.

Spring goes backwards two steps and we get two storms with heavy wet snow just a few weeks before my scheduled burn day. I'm convinced that the prairie won't dry out in time to do the burn. On the contrary, the weather turns warm and extremely dry (humidity levels more like Arizona than Minnesota). The snow melts quickly, and my burn breaks green up. Time to mow them again as short as I can before the burn.

The day before my burn, the DNR puts a burn ban into effect due to high winds and tinder dry conditions. I ask myself if I'm prepared for my burn if the ban is lifted the next day. The answer is yes. My burn breaks are wide, clear, and short. I have plenty of volunteers for the water packs, swatters, and rakes. As long as the wind dies down, we're ready to go. Burn day arrives with a light breeze and the DNR gives a thumbs up for the burn. All of the preparations paid off – the burn pulls off without a hitch. Afterwards, my wife and I thank our volunteers with a meal and we celebrate a successful burn. We know the prairie will be beautiful this year, playing host to so many animals, large and small. We are thankful.