

**Prescribed Burn - Questions and Answers**

**Question**: What is a prescribed burn?

**Answer**: Prescribed burns are controlled burns conducted according to a prescription just like a doctor’s prescription for medicine. The prescription is written to promote the health of an ecosystem just like a doctor writes a prescription to promote human health.

**Question**: Why is fire beneficial to an ecosystem?

**Answer**: Most ecosystems in our region are fire adapted – they evolved with fire as part of the lifecycle of the plants that are the backbone of the ecosystem.  Burning promotes plant health and seed germination, removes build-up of fuels that can lead to unplanned fires, and may inhibit non-native invasive plant species which are not adapted to fire.

**Question**: Aren’t animals hurt by the burning?

**Answer**: Large animals and birds will leave the area before the burn begins because of the presence of humans and equipment. Small mammals like voles and mice that live in the forest will flee the flames. Ultimately, the healthier forest promoted by the fire will support more wildlife.

**Question**: How is burning a forest good for it?

**Answer**: Burning tends to increase woody growth in the forest understory. It removes much of the old plant material, or duff on the forest floor. This allows seeds to reach the soil, and the soil to heat and cool which promotes seed germination. The burned duff also provides important nutrients to help plants grow. Much of the forest in this area was composed of oak and blueberry species which thrive on the effects of fire. The lack of recent forest burns has contributed to the loss of these species. Burning may also directly harm non-native plant species which did not evolve with fire as part of their life cycle.

**Question**: Isn’t burning dangerous?

**Answer**: The burn is carefully planned and coordinated with the Virginia Department of Forestry, and Fairfax County Fire and Police Departments. Special permits are obtained from the County Fire Marshall’s Office. Neighbors are notified, and the site carefully prepared to prevent the fire from getting out of control. The burn is conducted and overseen by trained staff that have the proper equipment to contain and guide the burn according to the plan.  Burns are only conducted on days with appropriate weather conditions that suit the conditions of the particular site.

**Question**: Won’t there be a lot of smoke?

**Answer**: Smoke is the part of the burn that is most likely to affect people. In fact, the Smoke Plan is one of the most important parts of the burn prescription. It accounts for wind direction and speed. The burn can only be conducted if all weather conditions cooperate so that the smoke will lift and leave the area properly and have minimal effect on roads homes, businesses, airports, schools or other sensitive locations. The burn will be conducted in the middle of the day and during a weekday to ensure maximum smoke removal and minimal impact on people.

**Question**: Will you burn all of the time?

**Answer**: No. Forest burns are usually done in the winter or spring while the fuels are dry, after the animals have gotten to eat most of the seeds and before summer green-up occurs. A forest burn would probably occur more than 3-5 years after the last burn in the same location under natural conditions. During a forest restoration project, burning might occur once every 3-6 years. This allows plants to grow and mature and minimizes disruption to animals. However, we may burn an adjacent forest stand the next year. This gives the forest a patchwork pattern that provides the most wildlife benefit.

**Question**: What will the forest look like after the burn?

**Answer**: Overall the forest will look very similar – the trees will still be standing and will not be destroyed by the fire. The ground will appear black and gray from the burnt leaves, and sticks or logs may be turned to ash. This will slowly fade with rain and weathering and then disappear during the spring and summer as the forest “greens-up” with new plant growth. The goal is to develop a more diverse forest system of native trees, shrubs and wildflowers.

An informational video and more Information about the Park Authority’s burn program is available on our website at:   <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/nature/prescribed-burn>