DEDICATED TO THE PROMOTION OF TOWNS COUNTY

OPINIONS & COMMENTARY

Good Fires Prevent Bad Ones

RC&D
Frank Riley
Executive Director

Acontrolled or prescribed burn, also known as hazard reduction burning, backfire, swailing, or a burn-off, is a wildfire set intentionally for purposes of forest management, farming, or land clearing.

Fire is a natural part of forest ecology, and controlled fire can be a very efficient and economical tool for foresters to achieve desired results when managing forests. Hazard reduction or controlled burning is conducted during the cooler months to reduce fuel buildup and decrease the likelihood of serious hotter out-of-control fires at the wrong time when damage can occur.

Controlled burning stimulates the germination of many desirable forest trees, and reveals soil mineral layers which increases seedling and shrub growth, thus renewing the forest. Some require heat from fire to open cones to disperse seeds and trees like Longleaf, which must have fire to stimulate growth. For many species in our forests, fire is a necessity for regeneration, and nature has always provided it. But federal policies created by government forest managers decades ago thought they knew better than Mother Nature (Smokey Bear campaign) and put policies in place to prevent and suppress all fires in the forest, good and bad.

This policy of suppression has created the situation we have today with a huge build-up of natural fuel that creates more fires, hotter fires that are more destructive, and leads to a longer season that grows every year. These factors make wildfires costlier because it takes more resources to contain and keep the fires away from houses that are built where forests used to be. There are two basic causes of wildfires. One is natural (lightning) and the other is people. Controlled burns have a long history in wildland management. Pre-agricultural societies used fire to regulate both plant and animal life.

Fires, both naturally caused and prescribed, were once part of natural landscapes in many areas. These burning practices ended in the early 20th century when U.S. fire policies were enacted with the goals of suppressing all fires. Since 1995, the U.S. Forest Service has slowly incorporated burning practices into its forest management policies. Now when you see smoke settling in our valley late in the evening, it is probably a controlled burn set by professional foresters under the right conditions using the latest technology to predict where the smoke will go once it leaves the forest.

Another consideration is the issue of fire prevention. In Florida, during the drought in 1995, catastrophic wildfires burned numerous homes. But forestry managers in the Florida Division of Forestry noted that the underlying problem was previous cessation of controlled burning, resulting from complaints by homeowners about smoke, but they found out the hard way that you can have smoke under controlled conditions or when it is raging out of control around your house. Smoke is the same, results completely different.

Controlled burns utilize back burning during planned fire events to create a "black line" to protect unburned areas from the fire. Back burning or backfiring is also done to stop a wildfire that is already in progress. It is called back burning because the small fires are designed to 'burn back towards the main fire front' and are usually burning and traveling against ground level winds. Firebreaks are also often used as an anchor point to start a line of fires along natural or manmade features such as a river, road, or a bulldozed clearing. Each year additional leaf litter and dropped branches increases the likelihood of a hot and uncontrollable fire.

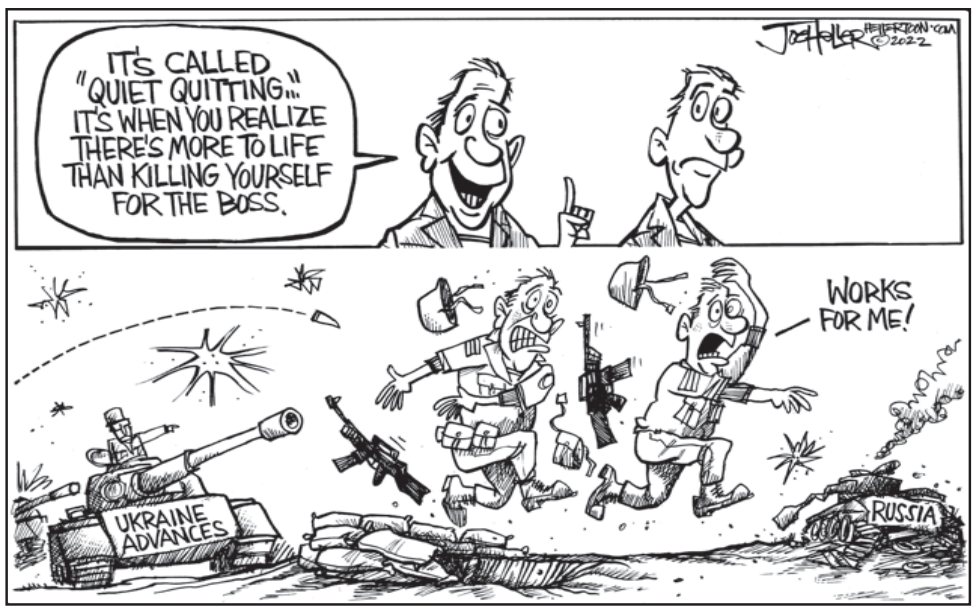
Controlled burns are sometimes ignited using a tool known as the driptorch, which allows a steady stream of flaming fuel to be directed to the ground as needed. Variations on the driptorch can be used such as the helitorch, which is mounted on a helicopter, or other improvised devices such as mounting a driptorch-like device on the side of an ATV. High temperatures from fires can harm the soil, damaging it physically, chemically or sterilizing it, but controlled burns tend to have lower temperatures and will not harm the soil as much as wildfires, though steps can be taken to treat the soil after a burn. Controlled burning reduces fuels, may improve wildlife habitat, controls competing vegetation, improves short-term forage for grazing, improves accessibility, helps control tree disease, and perpetuates fire dependent species.

In mature longleaf pine forest, it helps maintain habitat for endangered red-cockaded woodpeckers in their sandhill and flatwoods habitats. In recent years we have experienced smoke settling in our valley that came from fires in the next county or state. These fires were intentionally set by forestry professionals under the optimum conditions, so you can rest assured that the fire is doing good in some forest nearby.

Mother Nature was managing forests long before man took over, and she does a much better job because she has much more experience. For more information on controlled burns, contact your local Georgia Forestry Commission office or U.S. Forest Service office in your area or Chestatee-Chattahoochee RC&D at www.chestchattrcd.org.

Guest Columns

From time to time, people in the community have a grand slant on an issue that would make a great guest editorial. Those who feel they have an issue of great importance should call our editor and talk with him about the idea. Others have a strong opinion after reading one of the many columns that appear throughout the paper. If so, please write. Please remember that publication of submitted editorials is not guaranteed.



When a Life Lesson Flies in Your Face

Outside The Box
By: Don Perry
worldoutsidethebox.com

When Achilles was born, according to Greek mythology, it was prophesied that he would die young. To protect him from his fate, Achilles' mother took him to the River Styx and washed him in its magical waters to make him invulnerable to all injury. She missed a spot, the very spot where she held him by the heel to dip him in the river, and that's exactly where a poisoned arrow found its mark and ended Achilles' life during the Trojan war.

We all have an "Achilles' heel," a weakness or vulnerability. Usually we have more than just one. When someone says "that really pushes my buttons," chances are they really do have several, most likely of their own design and manufacture.

Some people are so full of anger and frustration that it's not necessary to find the right button to trigger a reaction. Such people react like a touch screen on a phone and the slightest pressure can set them off.

My own Achilles' heel reveals itself every spring. I usually have a fairly high tolerance for bugs, but I can't stand horse flies. Or deer flies. Or any member of that family of blood letting buzz bombs, those infernal flying steak knives that have no difficulty cutting through the hide of a cow or horse, much less any exposed human skin. My ill will for the whole lot is such that I will risk allowing a landing and feeling the first cut of the knife for a chance at smashing the guts out of my unwelcome passenger.

Horse flies know that I am their mortal enemy, and they send their best warriors to confront me. Once they even sent an assassin.

Years ago I was a regular swimmer in Lake Chatuge. This was back when the lake didn't taste funny and the water quality was better. (Many thanks to MountainTrue for their continuing efforts to improve the health of the lake and its watershed.)

I was swimming one day at the Jack Rabbit beach where the lake is fairly narrow and a swim to the opposite shore and back was a good workout. There were several buoys in place which provided a place to rest if needed, and on this beautiful spring day I was the only person at the beach, though as it turns out, I was not alone.

The water was chilly that day, so I decided to limit my swim to between the buoys. I had just passed the first buoy doing the breaststroke when I felt a sharp stinging sensation on the back of my head. The telltale buzzing sound announced the presence of steak knives on the wing. What kind of diabolical bug, designed for feeding off grazing livestock, would fly halfway across a lake to harass a swimmer? It's hard not to take such an affront to logic and good manners personally!

If you're familiar with the breaststroke, you know that the head becomes partially to totally submerged with each stroke, and that blasted fly was timing his attack to every half stroke when I came up for air. I was bleeding and angry, so I interrupted my swim to tread water and do battle with the evil denizen.

A spirited battle ensued. I splashed and swatted. The fly circled and darted and dive bombed. The conflict seemed to go on forever until a fortunate swipe of my hand actually submerged the beastly bug. I was triumphant! But only for about two seconds until, to my horror and amazement, the fly emerged from the water and flew away across the lake.

It was then I realized that the battle with the assassin fly had left me exhausted, and I was a long way from the shore in cold water. If you've ever been in a similar situation, you'll remember that first twinge of panic which must be immediately put to rest if you hope to make it to shore.

I was a good swimmer. My training took over my thought processes, and I'm here today to tell the story.

How many stories can we all tell about the times when irrationality and anger brought us to the brink of disaster and beyond? Anger has long been the Achilles' Heel of our species. Crimes of passion, assault and outrage are our daily headlines. We tend to think that a bad temper is one of the hazards of youth, but anyone who has driven through Hiawassee and been tailgated or given the middle finger by an angry old man, knows otherwise.

The remedy for anger is vigilance. We never know when a horse fly or some other antagonist will be waiting to reveal our weaknesses. Anger is like a horse harried by biting flies, and we must never allow that horse to get the bit in his teeth.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR SHOULD BE E-MAILED OR MAILED TO:

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Our email address: tcherald@windstream.net

Letters should be limited to 200 words or less, signed, dated and include a phone number for verification purposes. This paper reserves the right to edit letters to conform with Editorial page policy or refuse to print letters deemed pointless, potentially defamatory or in poor taste.

Letters should address issues of general interest, such as politics, the community, environment, school issues, etc. Letters opposing the views of previous comments are welcomed; however, letters cannot be directed at, nor name or ridicule previous writers.

Letters that recognize good deeds of others will be considered for publication.*

Note: All letters must be signed, and contain the first and last name and phone number for verification.

Sweet Sorghum

UGA extension UNION COUNTY
Watching and Working
Jacob Williams

Fall is approaching, even though we have a few more hot days left. Sweet sorghum in the fall is part of culture and history in the mountains. It used to be more common and there were sorghum mills scattered all over the place. There are still a few people who grow sweet sorghum for syrup and carry on the tradition. Today let's talk about the history of sorghum, how it's grown, and how it's turned into syrup.

Sorghum is a member of the grass family. It originated in Northeastern Africa. Sorghum has been bred to fulfill four different modern day uses. Grain sorghum is used for flour. Forage sorghum is used to feed livestock. Biomass sorghum is used for bioenergy. Sweet sorghum is used for sorghum syrup. Sorghum made its way to America in the 1850s. Today, the Southeast, and particularly Appalachia, is known for sorghum syrup production.

Sorghum syrup production has declined over the years. This decline is largely due to its production being heavily labor intensive. Production has also declined as other glucose syrups have taken over. However, recently sorghum syrup has seen a bit of a resurgence with the increased interest in locally made products.

Sorghum is an important crop because it performs well under adverse soil conditions or drought. It does not require a lot of fertilizer, and adding too much nitrogen to the soil will decrease sugar levels. Typically sorghum is planted in May and ready to harvest at mid-September through early October. Weeds can be an issue with sorghum because it grows very slowly at the beginning of the season, giving the weeds a chance to grow up around it.

Sugarcane aphid is the biggest challenge of growing sweet sorghum. Sugarcane aphid is an invasive species that is resistant to many different insecticides, making it very difficult to control. It overwinters in south Florida and moves northward each year. If left untreated, sugar cane aphids will destroy a field of sorghum. When they start to arrive, you will see hundreds of them clustered on a plant, and they will feed off that plant until it dies and move onto the plant next to it. There are websites that are used to track the movement of sugarcane aphids northward each year to let growers know when they need to begin the treatment.

The key to producing good syrup is to have a high Brix level in the sorghum stalks. Brix is a measurement of sugar in an aqueous solution. One degree Brix is 1 gram of sucrose in 100 grams of aqueous solution. Deheading, or removing the seed head at the top of the plant, will increase the Brix number. It is also important to harvest at the time when Brix is at its peak. After it peaks, it will start to decline.

Once the sorghum is harvested, it must be pressed to extract the juice out of it. Historically this was done with a mule-powered press, but there are electric ones available now. The juice is allowed to settle and then run through the pan. The pan is over a fire that cooks out the water in the juice. Typically, a producer will get 1 gallon of syrup for 8-10 gallons of juice. After cooking, the syrup is ready to sell.

If you are interested in growing sorghum, contact your County Extension Office or email me at Jacob.Williams@uga.edu.

I am hosting program on Georgia Ginseng on October 3rd via webinar from 6 – 8 pm. If you are interested in attending you can register at this link. https://ugeorgia.ca1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_5aUUKTwfeao23ZQ

Habitat for Humanity

Habitat Happenings
Executive Director
Charlotte Randall

In December of 2021, Habitat for Humanity of Williamsburg, Virginia, became the first affiliate to successfully complete a 3D-printed home. This three-bedroom, two-bath, 1,200-square-foot home was constructed in a mere 12 hours. With the advancement in technology, 3D printing is setting the stage in an emerging market that allows for sustainable, cost-effective homes and half the time and price of traditional stick-built homes.

What exactly is a 3D-printed home? By taking a digital file and footprint of the house design, BOD (Build on Demand) printers deposit material into the home using concrete. While 70%-80% of the home is constructed in concrete, the remaining is built with traditional material. Companies like ICON and SQ4D are taking this idea to reality and successfully completing not only houses but commercial buildings. With the ability to customize the wall depth, 3D-printed houses allow for more insulation and higher R values. Concrete is resistant to fires, pests, mold, hurricanes, and other natural disasters that stick-built homes have been prone to. SQ4D homes offer a 50-year warranty on their products, while meeting state and local codes they are currently building in.

After years of technological experimentation and engineering, 3D-printed houses are emerging as a cost-effective and practical solution to the housing crisis. Austin, Texas, will soon unveil the largest neighborhood of 3D-printed homes, bringing an affordable housing solution to the area. While the project or location has not been unveiled, 100 affordable 3D homes will soon be available for purchase. The future of housing is shifting, and the ability to embrace and learn from it can provide a remarkable solution to allow everyone a safe and decent place to live.

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