

Preparing Iowa Firefighters for Prescribed Burns

Specialists from two national wildlife refuges in Iowa are helping train volunteer fire departments to assist private landowners and wildlife managers maintain and improve habitat conditions with prescribed fires. Many of the landowners are enrolled in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program.

"This project benefits critical wildlife habitat in privately owned corridors adjacent to federal lands," said Gregg Pattison, a biologist with the Service's Iowa Private Lands Office in Lamoni. "These habitats include grasslands and woodlands that need fire to maintain a healthy plant community."

The training program stemmed from the experiences of northern Iowa's Smithland Volunteer Fire Department; several of its members previously had been trained by Federal fire-response teams. Five years ago, the department began promoting prescribed burning – mostly aimed at invasive trees and

shrubs – as a public service and as way of raising money. Participating landowners make voluntary donations to the department, which provides "suggested" contribution rates based on acres, fuels, terrain and fire breaks.

The Smithland department's success prompted Agren Inc., an Iowa-based agricultural and environmental consulting firm, to obtain a three-year Conservation Innovation Grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to expand the pool of Iowa firefighters who could provide similar assistance to private landowners and help out with much larger wildfires. The now-expanded training project also is supported by Iowa Resource Enhancement and Protection Program funding, the Southern Iowa Oak Savanna Alliance and the Loess Hills Alliance.

Drilled on the Basics

In early 2008, 10 fire departments signed up for a basic wildland fire training course, which was held at Iowa's

Graceland University. Most of the departments were from the western and southern portions of the state, where grasslands are most concentrated. The course was taught in part by prescribed fire specialists from Neal Smith and Port Louisa National Wildlife Refuges. The training, Pattison said, was "by the book" – the same entry level instruction provided for Service employees. The training involved 40 hours of course work and field exercises designed to allow the firefighters to work safely with state and federal fire specialists. The trainees were drilled on the basics of wildland firefighting and the specifics of the fuels and terrain found in Iowa.

In part, the participating fire departments were prompted to learn more about prescribed fires as a way of raising money, Pattison said, but the units wanted to learn more about fighting grassfires, the most common kind of wildfire in Iowa. In parts of southern Iowa, if the weather is especially dry, many departments are called on to control a dozen or more grass fires a year.

As of May 2008, the freshly trained volunteer units had completed burns on more than 500 acres of public and private land. More burns are planned for the fall.

Pattison said that another 30 or so firefighters want to take the training. "We hope to get many more volunteer departments up to a basic level of wildland fire training," he said. "This kind of cooperative program would not be difficult to start in other states if there are good partners to help out. Our national wildlife refuges would certainly benefit." ♦

For more information on the Iowa training program, contact Gregg Pattison at 641-784-5356 or Gregg_Pattison@fws.gov.



Specialists from two national wildlife refuges in Iowa are trainers in a program designed to equip volunteer fire departments with the skills needed to conduct prescribed fires. (USFWS)