



Need to Burn Debris? Burn Within the Law

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Throughout history, fire has been both a servant and an enemy of man. When under man's control it provides light and heat, cooks food, and eliminates unwanted debris. Out of control, fire can damage or destroy valuable resources: forests needed for wood and fiber production; wildlife, its habitat and food sources; watersheds that produce high-quality water; soils; forage for domestic livestock; scenic beauty; man's improvements to the land such as fences, outbuildings, homes, etc.; and sometimes human life itself.

Oklahomans have used fire as a land management tool since before statehood. When broadcast burning is planned and used under proper circumstances, in favorable weather conditions, and for a specific purpose, it becomes an indispensable tool for managing the land. But too often, Oklahoma experiences uncontrolled wildfires that do much more damage than they do good. In a typical year, Oklahoma will have 1,600 wildfires, which will burn 44,000 acres and do approximately \$3.7 million in damage. These statistics only apply to the one-tenth of Oklahoma that has organized wildfire protection because of the existence of commercially important forest resources. There are no wildfire statistics for the other nine-tenths of the state.

We cannot blame this high incidence of wildfire on natural causes. Nine out of every ten fires are caused by man, and six of these are set intentionally and maliciously (Figure 1). Woods arson is a terrible problem in Oklahoma and throughout the south. The other major cause of wildfire in Oklahoma is the loss of control of debris fires, when citizens try to use fire as a management tool without planning and preparation. Most wildfires can be prevented through education about danger and damage of wildfires and intensive planning and management of controlled fires.

Do You Really Need to Burn?

Far too often, people burn from sheer habit, tradition or simply because it is the easiest way to solve an immediate problem. They can toss a match on a pile of debris or string fire along one side of a pasture and then go on about other business. This attitude has caused destruction beyond our imagination.

Consider—is that brush pile really in the way or would it be better left as a home for rabbits or protective cover for quail? Perhaps it could have been used to plug a gully. Burning your

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FY 86 WILDFIRE CAUSES

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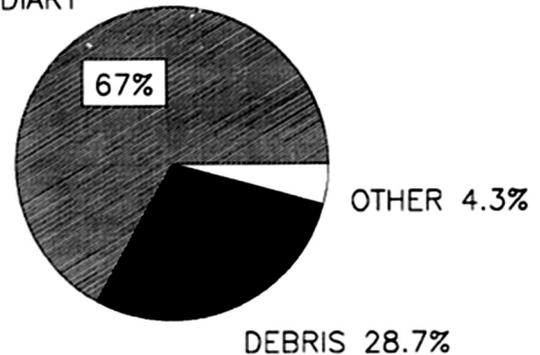


Figure 1. Causes of Wildfire.

pasture will usually result in increased forage production and quality, but it will also expose the soil to the drying effects of sun and wind and can reduce total production of forage when soil moisture is critical in the spring.

If you really need to burn brush piles and their debris, there is a way to do it safely and legally.

What Is The Law?

Oklahoma statutes, 1971, Title 2, Paragraph 1301-101 through 104 contain the Oklahoma Forestry Code. The law is very specific relating to wildfires.

It is unlawful to carelessly or willfully start a fire on someone's land or to allow fire on your property to escape to the property of another. In Forestry Division protection areas, the local office or representative of the Division must be notified of your intention to burn at least four (4) hours in advance, and verbal or written approval must be obtained. Failure to do so is a misdemeanor. Leaving a campfire unextinguished is also unlawful, and the violator is guilty of a misdemeanor. Carelessness in starting or allowing fire to escape is punishable as a misdemeanor, and willfulness in this regard is classed as a felony. Guilty parties are financially liable for damages caused. In addition to liability for civil damages, the violator is also financially responsible for all expenses incurred in suppressing the fire.

Copies of the Oklahoma Forestry Code may be obtained from the Forestry Division, 2800 N. Lincoln Blvd., Oklahoma City, OK, 73105.

How Can You Burn Safely?

Common sense is the most valuable attribute in relation to burning. There are, however, a number of rules which must be followed to ensure a safe burn.

Rule 1. Pile brush or debris. Piling the fuel will concentrate the heat in a smaller area and enable you to burn more efficiently. This will also reduce the size of the risk area and shorten the length of the firebreak you will need to construct. Windrowed brush piles should run the same direction as the prevailing winds so the fire will carry the entire length of the pile.

Rule 2. Plow or rake a firebreak around the debris to be burned. An ordinary farm tractor with a plow or disc harrow may be used to construct a fire break in most areas. If it is not possible to plow a fireline, a wide area may be mowed around the debris and then a narrow line hand-raked down to mineral soil on the inside and outside edges of the mowed area. The area between these two hand-raked lines can then be burned to provide a wide firebreak.

Rule 3. Have adequate equipment and men available to assist in suppressing the fire if it escapes. This support must be at the site before the first match is struck. Useful tools that every farm, ranch, or household already has include garden hoes, rakes, and shovels. Other very valuable equipment includes tractors and plows, barrels of water, wet burlap sacks, livestock spray rigs, and backpack sprayers. The action taken in the first 60 seconds of an escaped fire may determine success or failure.

Rule 4. Check the weather. If you live in the eastern part of the state, check with your local ranger or fire tower for an accurate up-to-date forecast of local weather conditions and advice as to the best day to burn. Burning must never be done on the spur of the moment. The weather must be seriously considered because a sudden rise in temperature, shift of wind, or passage of a front can convert your debris into a raging inferno. Wind direction is especially important. You can be financially liable if smoke becomes a problem on nearby highways (Figure 2).

Rule 5. Light your fire properly. As a general rule, fires should be started before 10:00 a.m. if the weather forecast is favorable. This will allow the fire time to subside before midday. Most of our sudden wind changes and gusts occur in the afternoon. Burn the area inside your firebreak before you light the main fire so that an area free of flammable materials will surround the debris. Never use gasoline or other explosive material to light the fire. Kerosene or diesel oil will do a good job and will not create a dangerous explosion.

Rule 6. Never leave the fire unattended. Stay with your fire until it is completely out. After the debris is burned to your satisfaction, extinguish all embers and burning logs.

Rule 7. Notify others of your intention to burn. One of the most important precautions you can take is to notify your local ranger, fire department, and neighbors of your intention to burn debris. Outside the protection area, the Sheriff's department should also be notified.



Figure 2. Smoke can cause serious financial liabilities.

You Can Burn Logging Slash, Brush Piles, and Other Debris Safely and Legally if You Follow a Few Simple Rules.

Where Can You Get Help?

Many disappointing, costly, and embarrassing experiences can be avoided simply by notifying other people of your intention to burn. If you live within the area protected by the Oklahoma Forestry Division, the ranger or fire tower must be notified at least four (4) hours before you plan to burn. This will prevent a "wild goose chase" by a fire suppression crew when the towerman spots smoke coming from your land. Your ranger will be glad to assist you with planning the burn. Outside of this protection area, which covers much of the eastern one-third of the state, property owners should notify their local fire department or Sheriff's department (Figure 3).

Many communities have organized rural fire departments and have equipment especially designed for use in rough terrain. Some have purchased special fire fighting equipment and others have benefited from the use of government surplus trucks as the basic unit on which to build equipment specifically designed for rural fires.

By all means, keep your neighbors informed. They have a very intense interest in your plans because if your fire gets away, it can be very damaging to them also.

Your Fire Escapes—Then What?

Even though you have taken what you consider to be adequate precautions to ensure a safe burn, it may still escape your control. If this happens, regardless of whether it is a legal or illegal fire, there is only one thing to do. PUT IT OUT AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE! How this is accomplished will require various skills, equipment, and manpower needs, depending upon the type of fuel, wind, size of the fire, etc. If

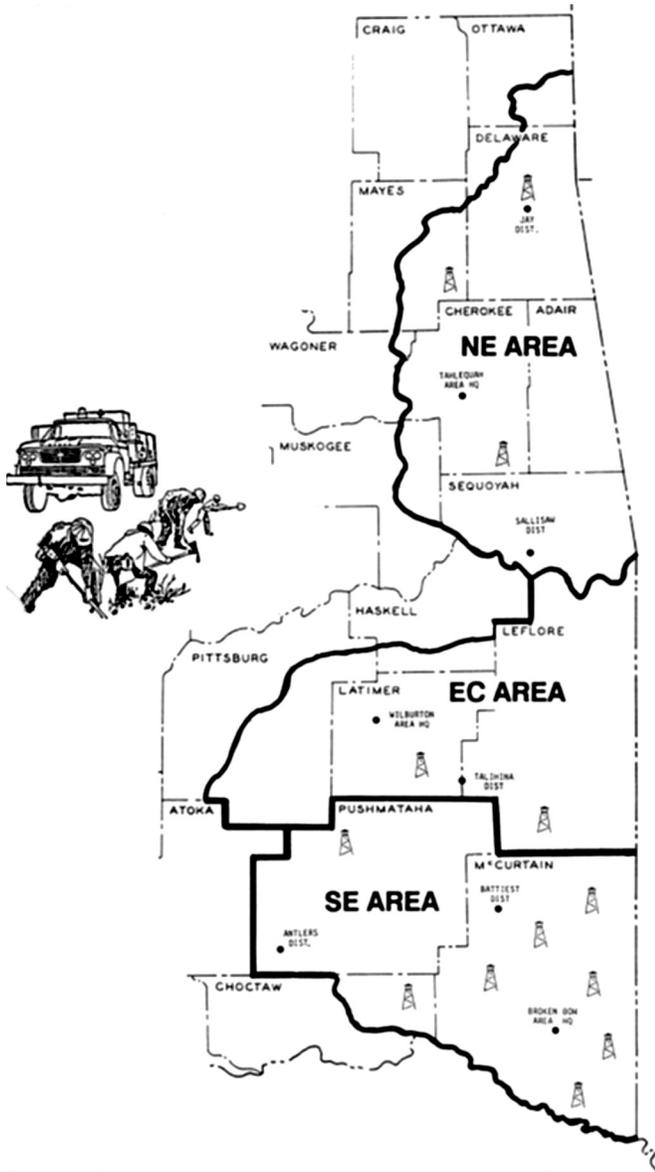


Figure 3. Area protected by the Oklahoma Forestry Division.

you have followed the proper procedures and have enough men and equipment standing by, you can probably solve the problem quickly. Very few fires actually escape and become wildfires if they are properly planned. If you are in the area protected by the Oklahoma Forestry Division, you should notify the local ranger immediately that the fire has escaped. By being especially cautious in your burning experiences, you will set a good example for those around you. Remember, nine out of ten forest fires are caused by man. Each of us has the responsibility of assisting in the protection of this resource by (1) preventing debris fires from escaping, (2) extinguishing campfires, (3) using our ash trays, and (4) reporting woods arson.

Oklahoma has vast resources upon which we are dependent for the necessities and joys of life. A careless moment with fire can leave scars which will serve as reminders of our carelessness for years to come.

Educational Materials Available at OSU

The Extension Forestry, Wildlife, and Aquaculture Program at Oklahoma State University provides educational materials concerning a variety of natural resource issues. Copies of the following fact sheets and bulletins are available from your local County Extension Center.

- NREM-5019 Need to Burn Debris? Burn Within the Law
- NREM-5020 Introduction to Growing Christmas Trees
- NREM-5021 Measuring Woodland Timber
- NREM-5023 Tree Planting Objectives and the Seedling Selection Process
- NREM-5024 Seedling Availability, Planting, and Initial Care
- NREM-5025 Early Protection and Care for Planted Seedlings
- NREM-5026 Weed Control in Christmas Tree Plantations
- NREM-5027 Fertilization of Christmas Trees in Oklahoma
- NREM-5028 Even and Uneven—Aged Forest Management
- NREM-5029 Growing Shiitake Mushrooms
- NREM-5030 Tree Improvement in Oklahoma Woodlands
- NREM-5031 Growing Oak Trees from Seed
- NREM-5032 Lease Hunting Opportunities for Oklahoma Landowners
- NREM-5034 Riparian Forest Buffers
- Fer-4* Use of Wood as a Residential Heating Fuel
- Fer-5 Best Management Practices for Forest Road Construction and Harvesting Operations in Oklahoma
- MP-130 The South's Fourth Forest: Oklahoma

The videotapes listed below can be borrowed free of charge through your local County Extension Center, or purchased following the directions provided. The cost of each videotape is \$24.95.

- TC 54 Management for a Lease Hunting Operation
- VT 338 Catfish Fee Fishing Operations
- VT 208 Growing Christmas Trees in Oklahoma
- TC 86 Survival in the Christmas Tree Industry
- VT 264 Logging, Best Management Practices and Water Quality
- VT 178 American Tree Farm Showcase
- VT 311 Oklahoma Forestry Judging for FFA
- VT 313 Oklahoma Forestry Judging for 4-H

Enclose check or money order payable to:
 OSU Ag Communications Services
 116 PIO Building
 Oklahoma State University
 Stillwater, OK 74078-6041
 (405) 744-4050

* For Fer-4, please contact Bill Ross, Oklahoma State University, Forestry Department, 008C, Agricultural Hall, Stillwater, OK, 74078 or phone 405.744.6432.



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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Robert E. Whitson, Director of Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma. This publication is printed and issued by Oklahoma State University as authorized by the Vice President, Dean, and Director of the Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources and has been prepared and distributed at a cost of 20 cents per copy. 0604