

Natural Resources Management Report

DeKalb County Forest Preserve District

March 2016

Primary activities during the month of March included:

1. Prescribed Fire. Ordinarily, March is just the beginning of our prescribed fire season. This year, with the warmer temperatures in February and March, we had finished all but one of our burns by the end of the month. It was a banner year for this task; we more than doubled last year's total. We were able to carry out our prescribed fires in 17 different units within five preserves for a total of 147.3 acres. This is more than double our total for last year. The early season warmth helped, but the additional trained staff and improved equipment was what really improved our ability to increase the number of acres burned.

Prescribed fire is an essential tool for managing the native plant and animal habitats of the upper Midwest. Fire created the vast prairies and savannas and helped maintain the woodlands of Illinois and our surrounding states. The rich farmland soils of our county would not exist without the fires that created the prairies. This spring, the Illinois Prescribed Fire Council published their first survey of the number of acres burned in Illinois; their conclusion is that, to preserve and maintain natural habitats in our state, much more prescribed fire needs to be carried out. We will continue to do our part.

2. The end of Brush Season. Winter is our "brush season", the time of year when we focus on removal of invasive woody plants like Honeysuckle, Buckthorn, Multiflora Rose, Autumn Olive and a host of others. With the frozen soil, no leaves or insects, and not too much snow, a lot of brush can be removed. This year, with less snow, more equipment, and a tremendous amount of help from our stewards, we cleared more brush than ever before.

Brush in our prairies can be removed fairly rapidly with our BrushCat by just mowing it down and grinding up the branches. But on areas with lots of trees, on slopes or on soft or muddy soil, the woody plants must be cut with chainsaws then carried to piles to be burned. This is where the stewards have contributed so greatly to accomplishing this task. "Many hands make light work".

3. Digging, division and potting of early season rootstock. As soon as the frost leaves the soil, we dig the roots of our uncommon native plants that are most easily propagated by root division. This sometimes takes place in April, this year it was March. The soil is cleaned off, the roots carefully "teased" or cut apart and then potted in plug trays or plastic pots until they are ready to be planted. Our staff and stewards produced over twelve hundred plants this spring. Some are already planted most are "rooting out" in their containers for planting later in the season.

4. Hiring of summer interns. With the help of staff from the NIU Biology department, we had fifteen applicants for our summer intern positions. Our interns are college students or recent graduates who have some background and education in biology, botany, ecology, conservation or related fields. We provide practical work experience and they provide enthusiasm, energy and another pair of hands to accomplish our many summer tasks. We have had very good interns as a result of our relationship with NIU's Biology and Environmental Sciences Department. Our two interns this summer will be Nick Steijn from Connecticut, and David Henderson from Chicago.



Terry Hannan sets a fire line at one of the central prairies in the Afton Preserve.



Frozen soil, a smidgen of snow, and enthusiastic stewards make brush burning easy.