Prescribed Fire and Smoke – Key Messages

**Fire is a natural force in wildlands and, after many years of fire exclusion, an ecosystem that needs periodic fire becomes unhealthy.**

* Fire managers use prescribed fire to mimic the natural role of fire on the landscape and help maintain or restore ecosystems to a healthier condition and reduce wildfire risk.

**Prescribed fires are carefully planned and managed to help reduce wildfire risk and lower potential environmental, economic and public health impacts.**

* Prescribed fires offer the opportunity to adjust the timing of fire to optimize where and how smoke disperses and to manage the amount of fuel consumed and subsequent smoke produced.
* Typically, emissions per acre from prescribed fire are less than those from wildfire.
* Air quality is an important value that is considered by federal land managers during every phase of the prescribed fire process from planning to implementation.
* Prescribed fire practitioners plan for and manage smoke from prescribed smoke to avoid adverse impacts on communities, minimize public health impacts, reduce visibility impairment on roadways, avoid impairing scenic vistas, and time ignitions to avoid impacting social and local economic activities.
* Just as communities and individuals are learning to plan for and live with fire, we must also focus on being “smoke ready” especially those at greater risk.
* Those with underlying health conditions, the very young, the very old and pregnant women are at greater risk of smoke.[[1]](#endnote-1)
* Communities that are “smoke ready” are better prepared for its impacts whether the smoke is from wildfire or prescribed fire.
* USFS, EPA and CDC are working together and working with state, tribal and local partners to advance the concept of “smoke ready” communities. When communities and especially those individuals at greater risk are ready for smoke, they know how to determine their local air quality, know what actions they can take to minimize their exposure to smoke, and know where to go for air quality alerts and further information.

**All federal land managers who use prescribed fire are required to comply with applicable regulations, which vary by location and project.**

* Prescribed fire practitioners routinely coordinate prescribed burning with the appropriate state or local air quality regulatory agency or state forestry agency to ensure smoke is managed.
* Many states have smoke management programs that specifically regulate prescribed burning and allow it only when air quality can be protected.
* On federal lands, prescribed fire is only used after thorough analysis and planning with an opportunity for public review and oversight by agency administrators.
* Federal fire managers are required to use Basic Smoke Management Practices ([BSMP’s](https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb1046311.pdf)) whenever they conduct a prescribed burn to minimize impacts to the public.
* Federal prescribed fire plans must identify smoke sensitive receptors, including population centers, recreation areas, hospitals, airports, transportation corridors, schools, non-attainment areas, Class 1 wilderness and park areas and restricted areas that may be impacted by smoke.
* Prescribed burns are conducted by trained and experienced professionals who are required to have smoke management knowledge.
* Many prescribed fires are postponed due to poor forecasted smoke dispersion or wind directions and speeds which won’t meet planned avoidance of smoke sensitive areas.
1. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA). (2019a). Integrated science assessment (ISA) for particulate matter (Final Report, 2019). (EPA/600/R-19/188). Washington, DC. And the USEPA Air Quality Index see definition of sensitive groups for PM2.5 (<https://www.airnow.gov/air-quality-and-health/how-smoke-from-fires-can-affect-your-health/> ) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)