

# COUNTY-WIDE

The Gatesville Messenger & Star-Forum

"Because every thing is important to someone"

## Prescribed burns: *They're catching on*

(Editor's note: Chase T. Brooke, a graduate student at Texas A&M University wrote the following story and provided the accompanying pictures on a prescribed burn near Gatesville.)

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Prescribed burning is increasingly becoming a common land management tool across Texas.

Ranchers, farmers and landowners are banding together to light their properties on fire with

the hopes that it will improve their land.

The Hamilton County chapter of the Edwards Plateau Prescribed Burn Association (EPPBA) provides a pool of people and equipment for its members to help each other safely burn pastures on their property. Comprised of ranchers, landowners, and other volunteers, they work together to burn each other's properties and learn how to improve their properties.

On Feb. 11, 2016 a group of about 20 assorted people gathered at the Brooke Ranch near Pearl. Over breakfast tacos and coffee, William (Bill) Brooke

went over the plans for the day's burn.

The plan was to burn just around 100 acres of mixed grassland and cedar with the hopes that it would kill the cedar back and encourage grasses to spread in their place. At around 10 a.m., two groups with kerosene drip torches began to slowly walk a line of fire down a tilled path.

The first group was comprised of Jim Keaton, president of the Hamilton County chapter of the EPPBA, who was instructing Texas A&M graduate student Chase T. Brooke in how to safely spread the fireline and make sure that the most fuel possible was burned.

Behind them, multiple ATVs and pickups with water tanks drove around watching to make sure the fire stayed contained within the burn area.

After finishing the first part of the burn, everyone kept an eye on the fire while munching on some sliced brisket sandwiches and chips.

After the quick break, and a check to make sure that the first fires were finished up, the group then moved and began their second burn.

The second clearing was larger than the first, but had a lot more piled brush and logs.

Flames reached high into the air as they raced through the grass; every so often a cedar

tree would ignite and send a roar of fire up above the rest of the flames.

An old abandoned deer stand caught fire, and by the time the flames had passed it there was nothing but a metal frame left standing to mark it.

Just a week after the fires passed, green sprouts of new grass could be seen jutting out of the soot and flame-blackened earth.

Within a month, the whole area was covered in thick native grasses taking advantage of the newly cleared lands. The skeletal remains of burned cedars stood and marked where intense flames had consumed their leaves.

Other pastures that were burned over a year ago are completely grown back; covered in rich and healthy grasses, if you

didn't know that fires had raged there in 2015, you would never have known it happened.

Prescribed burning is a powerful tool to help restore ranches and pastures to a healthier and native condition.

Since settlers expanded into the Hill Country in the 1800s, wildfires became less and less common. Suppressing these fires allowed for native ash juniper trees (more commonly just called cedar) to spread out and take over many of the oak groves and grasslands that had characterized the landscape.

With the cedar trees having completely overgrown large parts of the Hill Country today, prescribed burning serves to imitate the historical wildfires of centuries past, and keep them in check.

Cheaper than renting a bull-

dozer or bobcat to physically remove the trees, prescribed burning is a much more cost-effective tool to control cedar populations over large areas.

As seen at the Brooke Ranch and other properties, 15 to 20 volunteers can safely and successfully manage a moderately large burn over 100 acres in size.

Over time, the hope is that regularly burning properties in the Hill Country will help restore these areas to the native post oak savannas that once were the dominant upland ecosystems in this part of the Edwards Plateau.

It serves to remove cedar, and provides a way for local landowners to work together to manage their own properties' resources with the help of each other.

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*Prescribed burn*

Chase Brooke, a graduate student with the Department of Ecosystem Science and Management at Texas A&M University is shown lighting a burn line during a prescribed burn near Pearl recently. The burn was coordinated by the Hamilton County chapter of the Edwards Plateau Prescribed Burn Association, which encourages such burns to try and return areas to their native grasses and vegetation.