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Houston Arboretum to conduct prescribed burn in northeast corner of the nature sanctuary

The burn is an important wildland management tool

HOUSTON, March XX, 2021 – In partnership with the Houston Fire Department (HFD) and Texas Parks & Wildlife Department (TPWD), the Houston Arboretum & Nature Center will conduct a prescribed burn on approximately seven acres of the savanna area in the northeast corner of the nature sanctuary, located near IH 610 West Loop and Woodway Drive. This one-day burn is weather dependent and will occur sometime between March 22 and April 2. The Arboretum will send an update once the date is confirmed.

The Arboretum executed a successful prescribed burn in the late '90s and is looking forward to using this important tool in the future. Prescribed burns are heavily planned endeavors which safely mimic the essential natural fire cycle and are a common land management technique for improving resiliency and diversity of native habitat. Periodic burns also mitigate the risk of destructive wildfires by reducing the “fuel load” in the designated area - dead trees, leaf litter, and other flammable vegetation.

Houston Fire Department is the primary partner and lead collaborator on this project and is working closely with several agencies, including law enforcement, in addition to the Arboretum conservation staff and TPWD. Team members have undergone extensive training and meet national wildland firefighting and incident management standards and will oversee public safety.

Conditions such as wind speed and direction will be closely monitored, and if deemed unsuitable, the prescribed burn will be rescheduled. The Arboretum grounds will be closed to visitors for the duration of the burn.

“We want to assure the community that the prescribed burn will be conducted within pre-determined boundaries and prioritizes the safety of the public and the firefighters,” says Fire Chief Sam Peña, of the

Houston Fire Department. “The plan we are following also minimizes the effect of smoke in any residential and smoke-sensitive areas.”

The burn plan, developed by HFD, TPWD, and the Arboretum, identifies all necessary weather and environmental conditions that must be met for a safe prescribed fire, as well as contingencies to protect nearby properties. During the burn period, individuals might see smoke in their areas or on nearby roads. HFD cautions drivers to reduce their speed, use headlights when smoke is present, and pay attention to posted reduced speed limits. Fire and police personnel will be present near the burn site.

“This collaborative project is an opportunity for us to improve the health of the Arboretum’s landscape while sharing information with our visitors and community about the positive role fire can play in the environment. It is also a wonderful teaching moment since we will be using a land management tool that was historically used by Native Americans for grassland management,” says Trevor Rubenstahl, a Sr. Natural Resource Specialist on the Arboretum’s conservation team.

Texas has a history of naturally occurring wildfires, averaging about 10,200 per year from 2013 to 2018, making prescribed burns critical to maintaining native habitats like the ones found at the Arboretum. Historically, wildfires would be caused naturally by lightning strikes in dry conditions.

Jaime González, Houston Healthy Cities Program Director at The Nature Conservancy in Texas, worked for the Houston Arboretum during its first prescribed burn in 1999 and can attest to the results.

“The value of prescribed fire for grassland health was on full display the fall after we burned the Meadow,” he said. “Nutrients that had been locked up in old grass thatch had been released and made available to native grasses and wildflowers, and other species that had been struggling to find light and room finally had their chance. No one could remember a more beautiful fall wildflower season.”

“This technique is often used on prairies,” González continued. “Within weeks of a prescribed fire, you can see verdant, lush shoots emerge nourished by newly available light and recycled nutrients. And when the prairie plants are healthy, so are the pollinators, birds, and mammals that depend on them.”

Several short-term benefits are expected from the Arboretum’s prescribed burn, including:

- Reduction of the prevalence of woody species and exotic invasive species, like deep-rooted sedge, without the use of herbicide
- Reduction of fuel load to decrease the threat of destructive wildfires during dry periods
- Cycling of nutrients back into the soil
- Protection of soil from the compaction experienced with heavy equipment like tractors and mowers
- Creation of openings for new plants to sprout, such as native wildflowers
- Prescribed fire is more cost effective on a per acres basis versus mowing and mechanical vegetation removal

Long-term use of prescribed fires will help the Arboretum maintain its historic ecosystems, which will in turn increase biodiversity, provide environmental education opportunities, and preserve gulf coast prairie and savanna, both endangered ecosystems that are essential for native wildlife. Healthy

grasslands, like those found within the prescribed burn area, are better able to absorb and filter flood waters during flood events. Grassland birds, like quail and northern harrier hawks, need fire to maintain open habitat for nesting and feeding.

For more information and updates about the Arboretum's controlled burn, go to <https://houstonarboretum.org/prescribed-fire/>

For information on Wildland Fire Management and prescribed fire please visit: http://tpwd.texas.gov/landwater/land/wildland_fire_management/

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About

The mission of the Houston Arboretum & Nature Center is to provide education about the natural environment to people of all ages and to protect and enhance the Arboretum as a haven and as a sanctuary for native plants and animals. The Houston Arboretum & Nature Center, one of the first nature education facilities for children in the state of Texas, serves over 500,000 visitors annually. The Arboretum also provides nature education for more than 10,000 children annually. For more information about the Houston Arboretum & Nature Center and levels of membership, visit houstonarboretum.org.

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