Houston Arboretum to conduct another prescribed fire in the meadow area of the nature sanctuary

Prescribed fire is an important wildland management tool

HOUSTON, March 16, 2022 – In partnership with the Houston Fire Department (HFD) and Texas Parks & Wildlife Department (TPWD), the Houston Arboretum & Nature Center will conduct another prescribed fire, this time on approximately three acres of the meadow area in the western portion of the nature sanctuary, which is located near IH 610 West Loop and Woodway Drive. This one-day burn will occur between March 21 – April 21, and it is weather dependent. The Arboretum will send an update once the date is confirmed.

The Arboretum executed a successful prescribed fire in March 2021 on seven acres of the savanna area and plans to continue using this important tool in the future. Prescribed fires are precisely 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 fire will be rescheduled. The impacted area will be closed to visitors for the duration of the burn.

“We can 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 collaboration allows us to improve the health of the Arboretum’s landscape while educating our visitors and the community about the positive role fire can play in the environment,” says Trevor Rubenstahl, a Sr. Natural Resource Specialist on the Arboretum’s conservation team. “It serves as a teaching moment since we will employ a land management tool that was historically used by Indigenous Peoples for grassland management.”

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

The most significant benefit of the burn is as an educational opportunity to highlight the use of fire as a tool for land management and wildfire prevention. Ecologically, long-term use of prescribed fire will freeze forest succession and maintain an open prairie ecosystem. This benefits the Arboretum because it increases biodiversity of the grounds and maintains a small sliver of gulf coast prairie, an endangered ecosystem.

For more information and updates about the Arboretum’s controlled fire, 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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Link to photos here

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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 more than 600,000 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.