

HOUSTON ARBORETUM & NATURE CENTER

For Immediate Release:

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Houston Arboretum to conduct a follow-up prescribed fire in the meadow area of the nature sanctuary

Prescribed fire is an important wildland management tool

HOUSTON, January 31, 2023 – In partnership with the Houston Fire Department (HFD) and Texas Parks & Wildlife Department (TPWD), the Houston Arboretum & Nature Center will conduct a follow-up prescribed fire in the meadow area in the eastern portion of the nature sanctuary near the Meadow Pond between Monday Feb. 6 and Tuesday, Feb. 28, weather dependent.

The last prescribed burn in March 2022 also focused on the meadow area. However, a later burn date, which meant more spring growth and less dry winter vegetation, and heavy rains a few days before burning resulted in incomplete coverage of the area. According to Stephen Benigno, Conservation Director for the Houston Arboretum, “The entire meadow area was monitored afterward, and burned areas exhibited higher vegetation diversity, greater biomass, and less undesirable and invasive vegetation coverage compared to areas that were not burned.”

Benigno says that with this year’s burn they are hoping for greater coverage of burned areas and the same positive impacts for the native vegetation as the previous year. “The intent is to benefit the prairie ecosystem holistically. Eventually, we hope to burn the savanna again, which had a successful prescribed burn in March 2021, and we are working to prep areas of the woodland so that a prescribed fire can occur safely and successfully in the future.”

Prescribed fires are precisely planned to 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 reduce the risk of destructive wildfires by decreasing the “fuel load” in the designated area - dead trees, leaf litter, and other flammable vegetation.

“Another significant benefit of the burn is as an educational tool to highlight the use of fire as a means for land management and wildfire prevention,” continues Benigno. “The Arboretum is centrally located in the fourth largest city in the country, and successfully executing a prescribed fire is a wonderful learning opportunity for the public.”

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, adds nature interpretation opportunities, and maintains a small sliver of gulf coast prairie, an endangered ecosystem.

Houston Fire Department is the primary partner and lead collaborator on this project and is working closely with several agencies in addition to the Arboretum conservation staff. 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 want to assure our residents that this prescribed burn is a professional operation that will prioritize the safety of personnel and the public. The purpose of this prescribed burn is to minimize fire load risk within the Houston city limits. We follow a well-developed plan that minimizes the effect of smoke in all residential and smoke-sensitive areas,” said Fire Chief Sam Peña.

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. The Arboretum will send a media update once the date is finalized.

HFD cautions drivers in the area to reduce their speed, use headlights when smoke is present, and pay attention to posted reduced speed limits. Fire personnel will be present near the burn site.

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](#)

Photo credits: Anthony Rathbun and Houston Arboretum

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.