

HOUSTON ARBORETUM & NATURE CENTER

For Immediate Release:

Carol Brejot

carol@carolbrejotpr.com

713-503-3885

Christine Mansfield

713-253-4354

Houston Arboretum to conduct prescribed fire in the Savanna area of the nature sanctuary, weather depending

Prescribed fire is an important wildland management tool

HOUSTON, February 16, 2024 – In partnership with the Houston Fire Department (HFD), the Houston Arboretum & Nature Center will conduct a prescribed fire in the Savanna area located in the eastern portion of the nature sanctuary. It will occur on a selected day between Tuesday, Feb. 20 and Thursday, Feb. 22, weather dependent. This area is located near the Donor Boardwalk and the Savanna Field Station.

The last prescribed burn at the Houston Arboretum in February 2023 focused on the Meadow area, which was a follow up to a previous burn there in 2022. Due to heavy rains a few days before burning in 2022, the first Meadow burn resulted in incomplete coverage. The second fire was successful in terms of greater vegetation growth and diversity, lessening of invasive species, and an overall healthier ecosystem afterwards.

The Houston Arboretum has worked closely with the Houston Fire Department in conducting safe, prescribed burns. This burn will be the fourth prescribed fire at the Houston Arboretum since March 2021. The Arboretum executed its first successful prescribed burn in the late 1990s and believes in the value of this land management tool.

“Historically, the Houston region burned every two to four years from natural occurrences,” says Stephen Benigno, Conservation Director for the Arboretum. “Our landscapes are reliant on fire. And we’re seeing the positive impacts of fire on the diversity of native vegetation and reduction of invasive species in areas where prescribed fires have previously been conducted.”

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 to educate people about the use of fire as a tool 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 freezes forest succession and maintains native grassland ecosystems. This benefits the Arboretum because it increases biodiversity of the grounds, adds nature

interpretation opportunities, and maintains a small sliver of Houston's gulf coast prairie and post oak savanna ecosystems.

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.

"Prescribed fire will aid in reducing potential fire threats, due to years of natural overgrowth accumulation. Years of natural overgrowth accumulation presents a significant wildland fire threat to the surrounding residential community. The reduction of fuel load, through a prescribed fire, is the appropriate safety step in protecting surrounding residents and their homes", says Fire Chief Sam Pena.

The burn plan, developed by HFD 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.

NOTE: A news advisory will be issued the week of Feb. 19 with the exact date and details.

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

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

###

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.