

SHOULD I STRIKE THE MATCH

Considerations for Prescribed Burns

By Rich and Marion Patterson

Indian Creek Nature Center
6665 Otis Road SE
Cedar Rapids, IA 52403
www.indiancreeknaturecenter.org

It was a strong wind. Right out of the north blowing 30 to 40 miles an hour. The early spring weather had been dry, and the humidity was low.

Some unknown person struck a match. A strategic match. It was on the north side of a square mile of native Kansas prairie that I managed. That tiny glowing match somehow landed in the road ditch upwind of millions of prairie grass plants mixed in with a solid array of native Kansas forbs. It probably nearly died in the wind, but the ember caught. Within seconds a wall of flames was marching south pushed by the stiff breeze.

A passerby called the sheriff. An alarm went out, and volunteers from a nearby small town fire department responded. They had no training and drove their tanker to the sound end of the property, cut a chain, opened the gate and drove a couple of hundred yards into the prairie.

Within an hour I was part of a group who discovered the two burned bodies near the charred tanker. They'd done everything wrong.

Had they not driven into the fuel they would have been perfectly safe in a nearby pasture that livestock had chewed to the nubbins. Had they used their water to wet down an area in front of them the fire would have gone around them. They did neither and paid the ultimate price.

One tiny match can wreck havoc. We know that. We grew up with a stern face of Smokey telling us to crush 'em dead. Fire's bad. Fire's deadly. Kill every ember! Squash each butt! Drown every campfire.

AS A LAND OWNER OR MANAGER THERE'S PLENTY OF REASONS TO NOT STRIKE THE MATCH. Remember Smokey's sermons.

If I decide to light it.

I might send a fire across the line to the neighbors.

I might kill trees

I might get sued.

I might kill someone. It could be me!

Why in the world would anyone strike a match?

But, then again, think of the land. Fire, like rain and warmth, is a constructive force of nature

PLEASE. PLEASE. PLEASE. Strike the match. I'm a bloodroot. My ancestors and I have lived here since a while after the glaciers moved out. I can handle storms. I can take fire. I can endure drought. BUT I'M DYING. I CAN'T TAKE SHADE.

(Pause here to show slides of the impact of burning)

Deciding Whether or Not To Strike the Match.

So, how does one decide whether to light the mach or not????? Here are a few things to consider:

- What is the management goal?
- What is the owner/manager's comfort level with fire? Resulting changes in the land?
- Is the site appropriate for a burn?
- Do the neighbors know? Are the comfortable? Will the fire creep across the property line?
- Is there a trained fire crew to supervise? Do they have good equipment, leadership, and knowledge of the property and goals?
- Is it legal? Is a fire permit needed and received? Do law enforcement employees know of the burn?

If that decision is YES get some experience. Volunteer on another prescribed burn. Take a class, like the Indian Creek Nature Center's burn school, and start small. You can do tiny burns to get practice and see some impact.

And, have fun.

Rich Patterson is Director of the Indian Creek Nature Center in Cedar Rapids, IA. He has been conducting ecological restoration on prairies, woodlands, and wetlands since 1976 in Kansas and Iowa.

Marion Patterson is a Home School Coordinator for the Cedar Rapids, IA Community School District and has been involved in ecological restoration for nearly 30 years.