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2009 Prescribed Burning Projections Announced for Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge

Smoke from a 2003 prescribed burn in the Roanoke Marshes of Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge. These smoke plumes show the smoke management conditions that refuge officials look for - plenty of lift that will carry the smoke away causing little impact to populated areas.

photo credit: USFWS

Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge is busy preparing for another prescribed burn season. Generally the burn season begins in the fall and runs through mid-spring, but the 2008 fall weather conditions were not conducive to burning. Also, some units may be burned outside this range to accomplish management objectives. Prescribed burns are management-ignited fires conducted for specific management objectives under specified conditions. Objectives include reducing pine straw, dead grass, shrubs and other vegetation that could fuel an uncontrolled wildfire, as well as rejuvenating marshes and other habitat types by removing dead grass and encroaching shrubs. Last year's dry weather did not allow the refuge to conduct many prescribed burns. As drought conditions in the southeast have eased locally, refuge officials are monitoring for the right set of conditions with which the planned prescribed burns can be accomplished safely.

Prescribed burning improves wildlife habitat by reducing the build-up of vegetation that can limit plant productivity and diversity. Last year's lack of burning has refuge staff looking even more closely at this year's planned prescribed burns in order to help reduce the potential for impacts of wildfires to local communities. The Evans Road Fire on Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge this past summer acquainted the Outer Banks with the impacts that a large, prolonged wildfire can have on our area.

According to District Fire Management Officer Tom Crews, "Prescribed burning across the landscape, conducted during favorable conditions and on our own terms gives us a huge advantage for managing fast spreading wildfires during dry, windy conditions. When a wildfire runs into an area that has been previously burned, it slows down to the point where our firefighters gain the advantage and have a better chance of catching it.

The quicker we can contain the fire, the smaller it will be- which translates to less smoke, less ground fire disturbance and lower suppression costs.” A little smoke now during prescribed burning will reduce the huge smoke impacts like those that occurred during the Evans Road Fire.

Crews puts it this way, “Smoke can be compared to medicine. It is better to taste a bit of smoke every now and again, than to be forced to choke on it all at one time, such as we did on a few occasions during the Evans Road Fire last summer!”

Areas that are slated for prescribed burning this season include the three refuge farm field units and wood blocks, the area between Highway 264 and the sound from Manns Harbor to Stumpy Point, burn units in the Mashoes area, and several units in the Long Shoal River area. Interior units planned for burning include two units between Blueberry and Bay Roads and the area around the captive red wolf pens. Red wolf biologists are hopeful that a burn through the wolf pens will reduce an accumulation of leaves, pine needles, and other debris that breeds ticks and makes the pens vulnerable to wildfire.

Impacts are expected to be minimal to the public, but concerned visitors should call ahead to the Alligator River office. Motorists are asked to reduce speed, be patient, and watch for fire equipment or firefighters along roads when they see smoke. Questions or comments on the prescribed burns at Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge may be directed to Kelley Van Druten at 252-473-1131 extension 235, or kelley_vandruten@fws.gov.

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