LOESS HILLS COOPERATIVE

BURN WEEK

2026





POST-EVENT SUMMARY

The Loess Hills Fire Partners held the 11th Annual Cooperative Burn Week from April 27th to May 1st. This event provided an opportunity to join with participants and partners from across the region to achieve fire management and training in an atmosphere conducive to building personal skills across the full array of experience levels. It was also an opportunity to build relationships, share knowledge and techniques and work within a more complex organizational structure utilizing an expanded Incident Command System.

The Cooperative Burn Week was based at the Loess Hills State Forest owned by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources near Pisgah, Iowa. This year's event had a central Hills focal area of Monona, Harrison, and Pottawattamie counties. Burn units located on Iowa DNR's Missouri River Wildlife Unit, Loess Hills State Forest, Monona County Conservation Board, Harrison County Conservation Board, Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, State Preserves, Pottawattamie County Secondary Roads, and private protected lands were identified as available areas to meet weather parameters. The central Loess Hills has experienced a prolonged drought since 2019, with very little precipitation over the winter months. A switch in weather patterns to cooler temperatures, low wind speeds, higher humidities, and precipitation presented challenges, as well as opportunities, for the week's event. Participants were able to complete live fire operations on four of the five days during the event. Operational shift #1 was a non-burn day with presentations, exercises, and interactive learning. There was participation ranging from 70-114 personnel on any given day of the week. This allowed for trainer/trainee pairings to facilitate a one-on-one working environment. Participants were paired based on their qualification system (agency, NWCG, Iowa DNR IFIRE qualification system).

A total of 160 participants from 61 conservation agencies and organizations, volunteers and fire departments participated. The Iowa Department of Natural Resources was represented by 16 different wildlife units, state parks, forestry districts, and bureaus. Participants represented 9 different states at this year's event. There were 22 staff in attendance from the Department of Public Safety to train and operate in the State of Iowa Mobile Command Vehicle. These staff are part of the state All-Hazard Incident Management Team. The event also included 6 guests that joined in a

variety of capacities. Guests attended from the Bendix King radio, the Statewide Interoperability Communication Bureau, Iowa State Patrol Aviation, and Loess Hills Alliance.

Thirty-one individuals received evaluations for their NWCG or IFIRE Position Task books. This included FFT1/ ICT5 (squad boss), FIRB (firing boss), and ENGB (engine boss) task books within the NWCG system. As well as LINB (line boss), IGSP (ignition specialist), IGNB (ignition boss), and RXBB (burn boss) within the IFIRE system. Of those thirty-one evaluations, five task books received a final evaluation and completion status. Eleven different personnel served in a burn boss or burn boss trainee role. Other personnel were able to fulfill roles as agency burn bosses, squad bosses, UTV and engine operators and mentors. Numerous trainees were able to work in their respective trainee role during more than one operational shift with their mentor. Other training opportunities included learning new or different engine and UTV setups, an introduction to the Loess Hills, 7-day weather forecast from the National Weather Service, improving wildland tactics, a review of the Lowden Ranch escaped Rx Fire, a facilitated learning analysis of the Bronson Fire, and conducting After Action Reviews (AAR). Additional opportunities included rotating participants through two different sand table scenarios, water delivery tactics (pump n' roll, drafting, roles), and a drawing communication exercise, all within a complex burn organization with multiple divisions organized under the Incident Command System (ICS). See Appendix A for a detailed breakdown regarding number of participants and acres treated. See Appendix B for pictures taken throughout the week.

Twenty-five personnel from multiple agencies served on the Incident Management Team (IMT) in a variety of roles to assist with the planning of the event. The team continues to grow and expand to meet the event capacity needs. Several members served in trainee or learning roles on the team to gain experience and build redundancy within the IMT and region. Public information officers and other key staff for the event also promoted and moderated coverage of the event on several social media platforms, enhancing the messaging of the importance of prescribed fire and collaborative partnerships.

The weather conditions this year were favorable for live fire on four of the five days of the event. Participants were exposed to suppression training, following the size-up process, different tool usage, equipment familiarity, and briefing crew members before engaging the fire. The Mobile Command Center served as the Dispatch Center for the event. Divisions passed all information through the dispatching staff for accountability, communication exercises, and dispatcher training. The Dispatch Center was able to perform communication on VHF and 700 mHz, as well as perform frequency patches and facilitate 'incident within an incident' exercises with each division. This was a great addition to the CBW event, and challenged participants of all levels to communicate at a higher performance level.

In addition, the Iowa State Patrol Aviation team was able to provide an aircraft for an operational period. This asset was able to perform burn unit recon, simulate a water drop run, and perform air-to-ground communications with fireline personnel. This was the first time CBW has utilized aircraft in its operations.

Within our landscape and organizations, the squad boss (FFT1) and single resource levels continue to be the most crucial and critical for fire operations. Firefighters at these levels possess the local knowledge that aids in their ability to control both the holding and firing within their divisions, while also controlling the tempo for the day. Focusing additional time, knowledge, and experience towards these position levels is a necessity for all organizations within the Loess Hills and region to continue to build fire capacity, proficiency, and efficiency. The overall planning for multiple simultaneous divisions continues to stretch the overhead for further learning

and creativity.

Funding and assistance for this event was provided by The Fire Learning Network, the Loess Hills Alliance, the Gilchrist Foundation, and the participating agencies. These funders provided financial support for supplies, breakfast and evening meals, housing and planning meeting support. The Fire Learning Network is a key partner in the support for this event, and the continued advocacy for fire training throughout the world. A grant was awarded from the Gilchrist Foundation to purchase 24 new Kenwood handheld radios, and 3 BKR9000 command radios in 2024. The Loess Hills Alliance has financially supported the event since its establishment, and promotes the Loess Hills landform and preservation. Additional project support was provided by the participants and their agencies in the form of personnel and equipment time. Other participants donated their personal time and labor to support this event during unit prep, planning, and burn operations. The Loess Hills State Forest (Iowa DNR) generously donated meeting and logistical space for the week. Harrison and Monona County Conservation Boards provided lodging and camping space at their facilities.

Participants have shared that the Cooperative Burn Week was a positive experience and was successful in achieving multiple objectives, including land management goals, fireline training and experience, personal development skills and improving collaboration between partners in the Loess Hills, state of Iowa and Great Plains region. The participation of 160 participants and guests (capped capacity) speaks to the high level of interest among partners in collaboratively completing priority training and networking opportunities in the region. It also speaks to the success of the previous CBW events and the product participants are receiving. This was the first time attending CBW for 55 of the participants. The event also supported 31% of female participants. Several organizations from across the country sent personnel to gain fireline knowledge, learn in a professional atmosphere, and gain tips towards starting other cooperative efforts. The use of an expanded Incident Management

Team as well as a more focused Incident Command System provided additional organization and smoother operations on burn days, non-burn day preparations and throughout the week in its entirety.

The Loess Hills Cooperative Burn Week model has been adopted in other regions as well. The Little Sioux Watershed Conservation Partnership has been hosting their own cooperative burn week since 2022 with regional participation and success. The Canadian Prairies Prescribed Fire Exchange hosted their first TREX event in October 2022 in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. From that springboard, they are now expanding with the expectation of hosting 6 TREX events split amongst 3 provinces in 2026. A participant from Minnesota attended this year to observe the event in hopes of starting a similar event back home in the near future. This is a great start to expanding cooperative efforts in high quality areas. The incident commanders for the above events have attended CBW in the past to job shadow and pick up new tips to take home for their respective events. All these regional events will continue to collaborate and support each other for many years to come.

The Turin Rx burn is a noteworthy event from the spring's partnerships efforts as well. This burn unit complex encompassed nearly 886 acres in Monona County. The unit spanned 20 different landowners, (two conservation organization properties), and contained 11 residences. Several smaller burn units have been conducted in the area over the past few years, but the area as a whole has not been burned, or included as many properties, since 2013.

Multiple agencies had been planning for a year to design a feasible burn unit — with a very high level of successful completion — even with the complexity of landscape. For part of the planning process, organizers hosted a public information meeting for landowners and neighbors. This allowed for one-on-one conversations, good questions and a

chance to educate the group on the process of the burn implementation. The operation for the main unit included 35 personnel coming together to implement the burn. The personnel were split into operational divisions, including night patrol and following-day mop-up/patrol division to maintain coverage and a presence on the unit for at least two day shifts. Following days were monitored as needed. Firebreak prep, capable crews and a solid operational plan contributed to the completion of the 886-acre unit in 5 hours (all of which was by hand). The post burn fire effects of the Turin Rx were remarkable on fuel reduction (brush piles, down and dead, and grassland thatch layer) and eastern red cedar mortality. The persistent drought conditions over the past five years aided in the exceptionally low fuel moisture in the 10, 100 and 1000-hour fuels, as well as live eastern red cedar. The Loess Hills Fire Partners have been striving to implement more landscape-scale burn units for over two decades. The completion of this burn unit was a big undertaking, following the previous years Heendah Hills Rx and Grant Center Complexes, to expand landscape-scale burns throughout the landform. Coordination, precise planning and being opportunistic with weather conditions all contributed to the success of this effort.

The operation continued to show the knowledge and skills of local practitioners to implement safe and effective operations in a timely manner for both public and firefighter safety.



Photo courtesy of Megann Schmidt

APPENDIX A:
PARTICIPANTS, AGENCIES & ACRES TREATED

Participating Agencies/Organizations:

- Audubon Society- Great Plains
- Audubon Society – Upper Mississippi
- Bendix King Radios
- Benton County Cons Bd
- Bur Oak Land Trust
- Carter Lake VFD
- Cedar Falls State Radio
- City of Clive
- Conservation Corps of Iowa/Minnesota
- Council Bluffs Fire
- Des Moines Police Department
- Des Moines State Radio
- Ecological Fire Solutions
- Fontenelle Forest
- Harrison County Conservation Board
- Harrison County Sheriffs Office
- Hartwick Fire Department
- Iowa Department of Natural Resources
  - Parks Division (5 State Parks)
  - Wildlife Division (4 units)
  - Loess Hills State Forest
  - District Forestry (2 districts)
  - Private Lands
  - Fire
  - Conservation & Research
  - Outreach & Communication
  - Law Enforcement
- Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation
- Iowa State University
- Kansas Forest Service
- Kirkwood Community College
- Lewis Township Fire & Rescue
- Lincoln Parks & Recreation (Nebraska)
- Loess Hills Preservation Society
- Madison County Conservation Board
- Mills County Sheriffs Office
- Minnesota Forests Fire Learning Network
- Missouri Department of Conservation
- Mondamin VFD
- Monona County Conservation Board
- Monona County Sheriffs Office
- Oak Township VFD
- Omaha Henry Doorly Zoo
- Onawa VFD
- Pheasants Forever (Iowa, Minnesota, and South Dakota)
- Plymouth County Conservation Board
- Polk County Sheriffs Office
- Pottawattamie County Conservation Board
- Red Oak Fire Department
- Shelby County Conservation Board
- Smithland VFD
- Southwest Rural Fire Protection District (Lincoln, NE)
- Storm Lake State Radio
- Story County Conservation Board
- Sunshine Fire Protection District
- Tama 911
- The Nature Conservancy- Iowa, Nebraska, and Missouri Chapters
- The Nature Conservancy- North American Fire
- Turkey Creek Preserve University of University of Nebraska- Omaha
- Upper Iowa University
- US Army Corps of Engineers
- Van Meter VFD
- Warren County Conservation Board Woodbine Fire & Rescue
- Woodbury County Conservation Board
- Volunteers of numerous entities
- HyVee Foods
- Goodfellows
- Iowa State Patrol



Turin RX one week post fire. *Photo courtesy of Sarah Bell*

# of Participating Agencies/Orgs:	61
# of Fire Departments:	14
Total # of Participants:	160
Personnel-Hours:	5977 Hours
Equipment Utilized:	• 16 Engines • 27 UTVs • 1 aircraft • Mobile Command Center • Countless Agency Vehicles and Hand Tools

Photo courtesy of Fontenelle Forest



Burn Unit Completion Summary

Burn Unit	Ownership	County	Date	Acres
Turin Rx Complex	DNR-Missouri River Wildlife	Monona	4/20/2026	886
Old Town Park	Harrison County Conservation Board	Harrison	4/28/2026	281
Davis Wetland	Monona County Conservation Board	Monona	4/28/2026	52.8
Luton East Rand	DNR-Missouri River Wildlife	Woodbury	4/28/2026	114
Bothwell Grimes	DNR-Loess Hills State Forest	Harrison	4/28/2026	155.1
Carrigan Rains	DNR-Loess Hills State Forest	Harrison	4/28/2026	40
Eastern Hills Drive-Southeast	Pottawattamie Secondary Roads	Pottawattamie	4/29/2026	13.8
LHWMA Sylvan Runkel	DNR-Missouri River Wildlife	Monona	4/29/2026	332
Armstrong East	Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation	Harrison	4/29/2026	82
Armstrong Trialngle	Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation	Harrison	4/29/2026	6
Prep Canyon SP	DNR-Loess Hills State Forest	Monona	4/29/2026	109.2
Vincent Bluff State Preserve	Pottawattamie Conservation	Fremont	4/29/2026	20
Caddy CE-Johnson Ridge	Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation	Monona	4/29/2026	67.3
Smokey Hills-Johnson CRP	Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation	Monona	4/30/2026	70
Spencer Timber	DNR-Loess Hills State Forest	Harrison	4/30/2026	231.7
LHWMA Hathaway North	DNR-Missouri River Wildlife	Monona	4/30/2026	108
LHWMA Hathaway South	DNR-Missouri River Wildlife	Monona	4/30/2026	75
LHWMA Martin-McCall	DNR-Missouri River Wildlife	Monona	4/30/2026	71
Green Hill Ranch	DNR-Nishnabotna Wildlife	Mills/Pott	5/1/2026	331
Smith Lake	DNR-Loess Hills State Forest	Harrison	5/1/2026	141.9
Overlook SW	DNR-Loess Hills State Forest	Monona	5/1/2026	50



Public Org Acres	**2351.8**
Private Acres	**406.4**

TOTAL 21 Burn Units 3237.8 Acres

APPENDIX B: PICTURES

To see the complete photo album, go to:
https://photos.app.goo.gl/xSQh7rxy7XMGADcD9



Non-burn day activities promote various levels of training and skill building. The squad is working on a communication exercise to verbalize attention to detail through caricature drawings. *Photo courtesy of Melanie Schmidt*



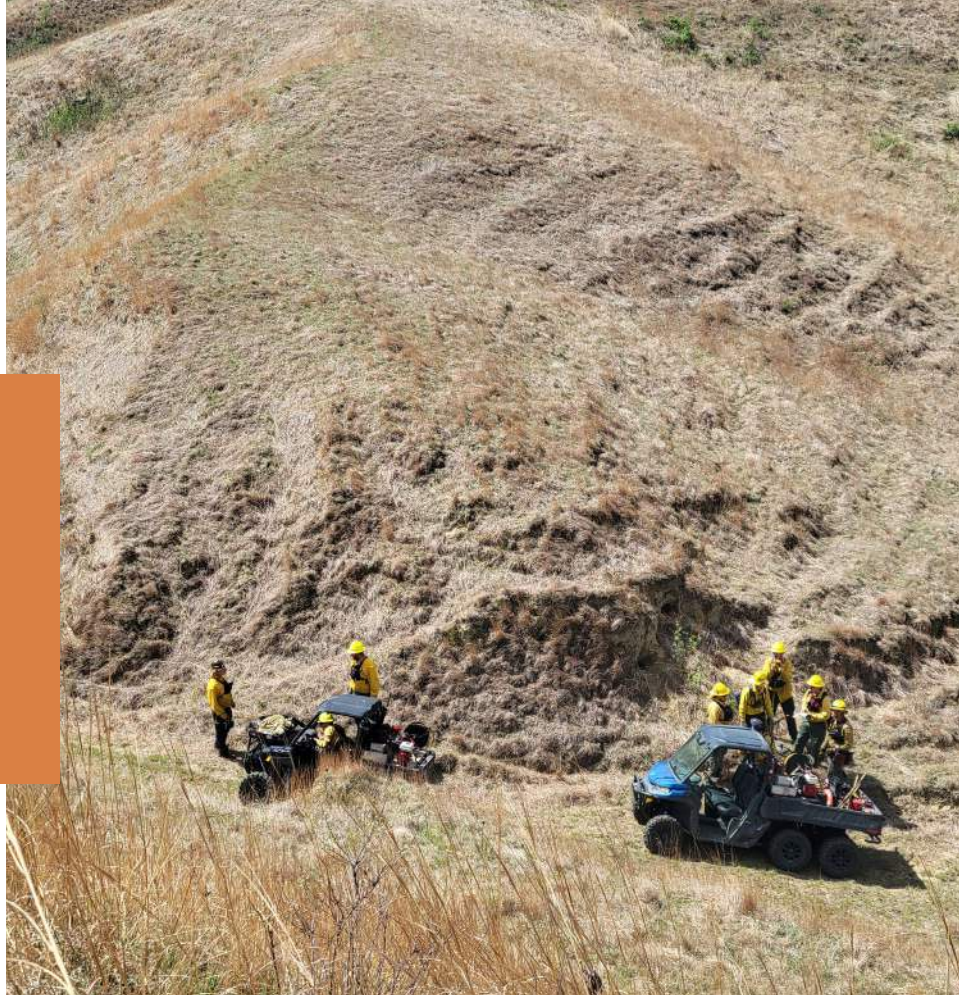
A squad ignites the perimeter on the Old Town burn unit in Harrison County. The adjacent burn unit had been burned two weeks prior. *Photo courtesy of Matt Dollison*



Dispatchers pause for a moment during their work in the Mobile Command Vehicle. Photo courtesy of Haley Nichols



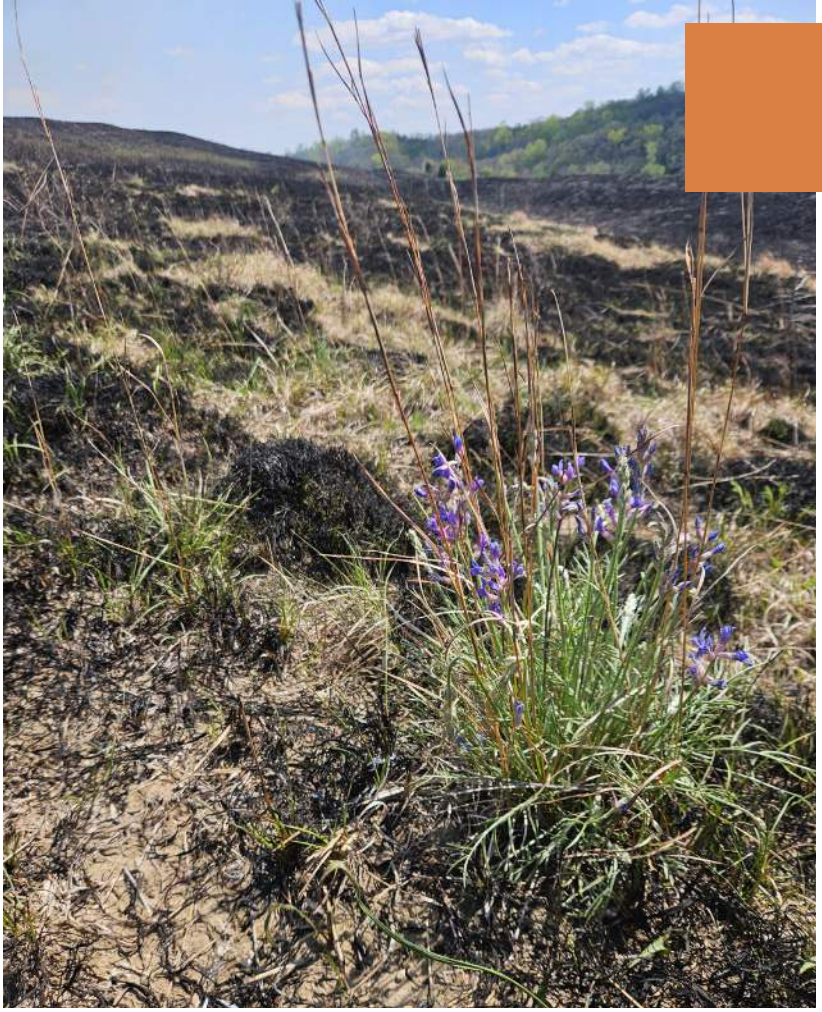
A mobile command tower was utilized for the event to boost communication capabilities from ICP in Pisgah to reach crews from nearly 40 miles away. *Photo courtesy of Haley Nichols*



Crews preposition in a saddle access point on the Sylvan Runkel burn unit. The picture depicts the steep Loess slopes and natural cat steps characteristic in the landform. *Photo courtesy of Joshua Crosbie*



Interior ignition and point protection are all aspects of prescribed fire regularly utilized for complete burn units in a timely fashion, and keep desire property unharmed. *Photo courtesy of Sarah Bell.*



A locoweed managed to escape the flames on the Armstrong property. This is just one of the many short grass prairie species native to the Loess Hills. *Photo courtesy of Ryan Schmidt*



The crew snaps a pic at the conclusion of their burn on the Loess Hills Scenic Overlook Deck. *Photo courtesy of Josh Schaben*



Monitoring weather conditions throughout the burning operation is vital for documentation. This firefighter checks weather while the crew continues their work to track trends and update the crew on any changes *Photo courtesy of Bridget Hanson*



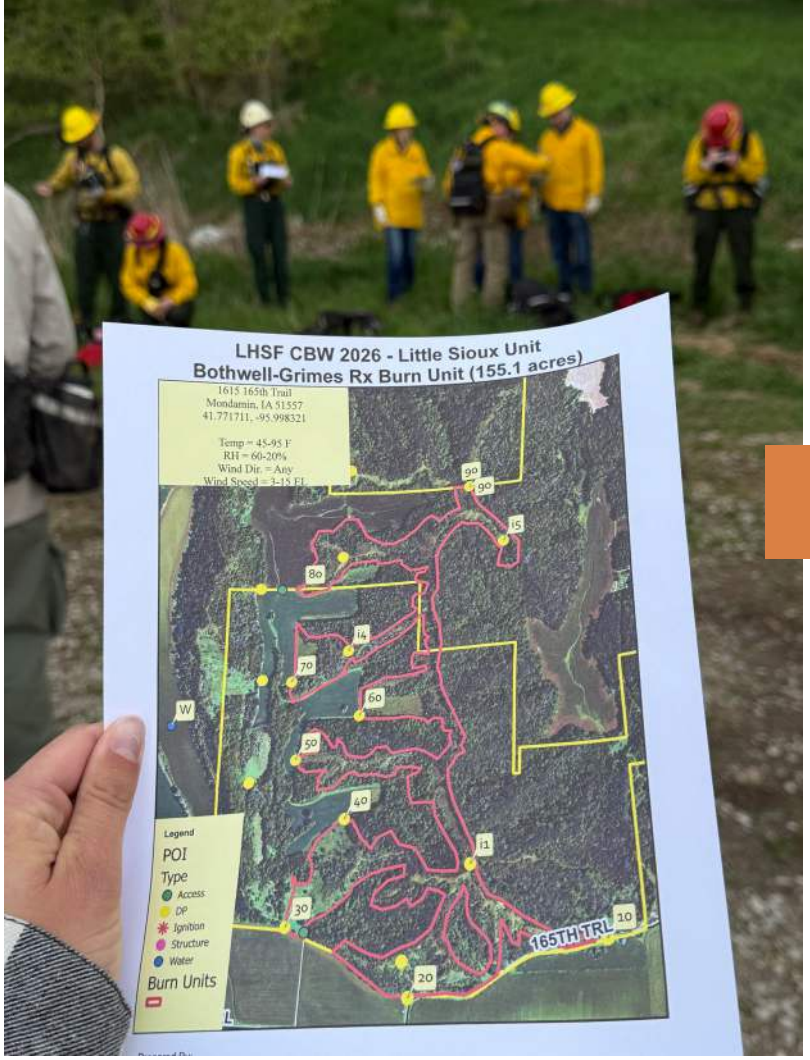
Ignition patterns and techniques can manipulate fire behavior to your advantage when used correctly. This crew utilized interior strip ignition patterns to assist in smoke management and fire intensity. *Photo courtesy of Chad Bladow.*



The Iowa State Patrol Aviation plane prepares to join the Cooperative Burn Week for air to ground communication exercises! *Photo courtesy of Kayla Johnson*

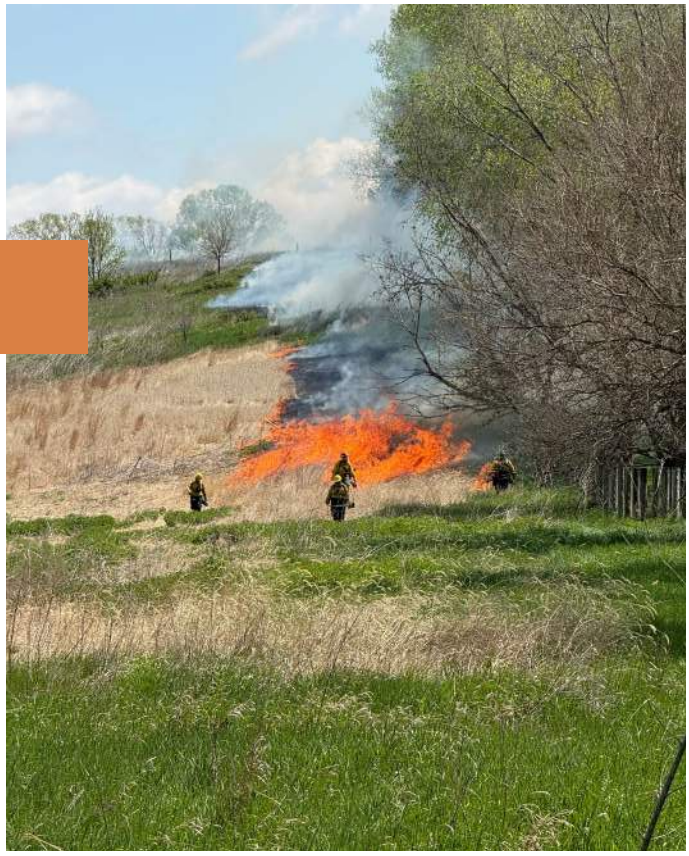


Orientation and presentations kickoff the week to prepare participants for the week ahead. Understanding the history, suppression tactics and techniques, and current weather and fuel conditions prepare the group for success and safety. *Photo courtesy of Grace Deines*



Quality maps with pertinent information is a key tool for firefighters to reference during a burning operation. During this briefing, crews study the map for drop points, water sources, and areas needing critical holding. *Photo courtesy of Grace Deines*

A firing boss leads the ignition team through their operation to ignite the downwind side of the burn unit at Smokey Hills. *Photo courtesy of Alexis Sonich.*





Honest feedback during the After Action Review is important to address the positives, the negatives, and the things that can be improved upon. We strive to contunially critique and improve. Ever fire is different and presents learning opportunities. *Photo courtesy of Thad Pothast*



Crew members pause during firing operations on the Spencer Timber unit of the Loess Hills State Forest. *Photo courtesy of Jason Andersen*



Positioning lookouts can address concerns of keeping eyes on different portions of a burn unit, especially when crews are operating in tough terrain. They can also be utilized as human repeaters if radio communications are challenging due to tall ridges and deep valleys. *Photo courtesy of Shawna Gorman*



Multiple strip ignition can generate desire fire effects, and reduce the timeline of the burning operation. Crews work up the valley to ignite the Overlook SW unit with prairie, as well as cedar slash. *Photos courtesy of Shawna Gorman*

Eastern red cedar is one of the species targeted for mortality in the Great Plains ecosystem. While cedar is native, the lack of fire has resulted in millions of acres of invasion over the past 40 years. *Photo courtesy of Michael Schmitt*

