

Warm Season Grass Burn  
At Billy Poffenberger Farm

-Submitted by Mike Kay  
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Billy Poffenberger's Farm stretches alongside State Route Alt. 40 from Mt. Tabor Road to Fox Gap Road next to South Mountain. Mr. Poffenberger has a keen interest in developing habitat for upland wildlife and has utilized different programs, including the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) to assist with this endeavor. In an effort to develop habitat for field dependent wildlife Billy established warm season grass meadows around his farm in strategic locations. Part of the maintenance of these meadows is to burn them every 3-4 years to get rid of thatch and rejuvenate the grasses. A warm season grass burn was conducted in early March 2007 to burn the field before any birds or other animals would begin nesting in the meadow. A safety strip was mowed around the field before the burning to contain the fire within these boundaries.

Qualified members of the MD DNR, Forest Service, Wildlife Division, and Volunteer Fire Fighters from Frederick and Washington County carried out this burn. Donnie Rohrback of the Wildlife Division who made the decision to conduct the burning evaluated the field. Once the decision was made to burn this field, a Prescribed Burn plan was prepared by Kevin Moore of the Forest Service that was submitted to the Regional Fire Manager and Regional Forester for approval. Mr. Moore acted as the Fire Boss on this controlled burn meaning that he supervised the process.

Preparing for the fire, the ATV's shuttled equipment and were a source of water to control the fire, Jamie (Fellow in red coveralls.) is holding a "flapper" which is used to extinguish flames, the fellows in the back are mixing the fuels needed to ignite the fire. Everybody on the burn must wear Personal Protective Equipment including fireproof Nomex cloths, hardhats, goggles, leather gloves, and approved footwear. The supervisors have portable radios to stay in contact with each other.

Patrol trucks were stationed in strategic locations in case they were needed. These trucks contain fire fighting tools and an additional source of water.

Numerous precautions are taken before we burn to ensure that the fire remains "controlled". Fire weather is taken to ensure that we are burning during optimum conditions and that smoke will not become a nuisance or safety problem. If the weather conditions are not right we will not burn. (The high fire danger conditions experienced last spring caused us to cancel most of our controlled burns.) Once we determine that conditions are conducive for burning we disperse throughout the site and carry out our assigned duties. One last precaution that is done before igniting the grasses is to conduct a small "test burn" to visually gauge how the fire will react.

Fire Boss Kevin Moore looks on as the test burn is carried out. The fire was behaving as expected and the smoke was rising straight up so the decision was made to proceed.

It takes a lot of experience and knowledge to safely burn a large field in a controlled style. The burn was carried out in a flawless manner by burning small sections at a time, using the 6 mph breeze in our favor.

Most fields have “light” fuels that burn fast and hot but do not burn long. Once the area was blackened it was relatively easy to extinguish flames using our water source and flappers.

Donnie Rohrback with the MD Wildlife Division evaluated the field, made the prescription to burn and assists with the practice. Ask Donnie about his Harley.

Here’s the “after” picture of the field. The burn was a success. Despite the appearance, this field will completely recover from this burn and the warm season grasses will be larger and more vigorous. Periodic fire is essential to maintain this grassland community.

Duane Poffenberger (Billy’s son) looks on as we burn. Billy is laid up with back problems. Hope you get back on your feet soon Billy!

Besides the meadows, the Poffenberger family planted a riparian forest buffer along Bolivar Branch. Survival is excellent and many tree shelters have been removed.

A view of the buffer area: The meadow descends to a dense, shrubby “covert” in the wetland that was planted for wading birds like sandpipers and woodcock. Upland species are planted on the far hillside. Cattle graze on the grasslands beyond.

Billy Poffenberger is getting close to achieving his vision of developing some prime upland habitat throughout his farm. His next project being finishing the planting of some hedgerows. The remainder of the farm is used to raise cattle and assorted crops. For his dedicated work Billy was nominated as a Watershed Steward.