



A firefighter sets shrubs ablaze at Fayette Historic State Park in May 2018 in a prescribed burn in Delta County. (Michigan Department of Natural Resources photo)

DNR fire setting for prescribed purposes

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Using the word “fire” in connection with important historical structures or sites or acres of mature forest is likely to bring a gasp of horror.

But planned fires, known as prescribed fires, also can be an important tool to maintain or improve forests and reduce the risk of wildfires.

In at least one case, trained personnel from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources even used carefully monitored fire to improve a historical site.

“When we’re talking about the forest, prescribed fire mimics the pattern of nature,” said Paul Rogers, fire prevention specialist for the DNR’s Forest Resources Division. “Some species of trees, such as jack pine, actually depend on fire to release their seeds.”

In a forest setting, a prescribed burn can clear unwanted understory – or plants and shrubs that grow among the trees – without harming mature trees. That can help eliminate invasive species that would choke out desirable native plants.

On a larger scale, firefighters will burn long, narrow swaths of forest to create fire breaks – gaps in the forest – that help stop the spread of a wildfire by depriving it of fuel.

In a situation where the forest threatens to expand into meadows or grasslands, firefighters will use fire to maintain openings, getting rid of small trees and shrubs so the grassland can stay grassy.

In 2018, the purpose of that prescribed burn at [Fayette Historic State Park](#) was stated as “maintaining openings,” but in this case the openings also helped reveal a piece of the park’s history.

The infield of a dirt horseracing track was overgrown with many types of vegetation. Using a brush hog or a bulldozer might have damaged the track, a site rich with artifacts.

“We didn’t want to ruin what was underneath, and we thought the burn would have the lightest impact,” said Glenn Palmgren, a DNR staffer who worked on planning the prescribed burn.

Any time DNR personnel conduct a prescribed burn, staff only work in favorable weather conditions – not too dry, hot or windy – and in cooperation with local units of government.

Public safety is always a top priority. Planned burns can be canceled at the last minute for safety reasons.

The DNR has not scheduled any prescribed burns in 2020 due to COVID-19.

However, in 2019, 92 burns on more than 8,800 acres were completed across Michigan.



A firefighter monitors a prescribed burn at Fayette Historic State Park. (Michigan Department of Natural Resources photo)

The 711-acre Fayette Historic State Park features the town site with more than 20 historic buildings, a modern campground, harbor slips, a boat launch, a beach and 5 miles of hiking and ski trails.

The park offers impressive views from limestone cliffs that surround the harbor. The town site was once a busy iron-smelting industrial community surrounding Snail Shell Harbor. Visitors can stop at the visitor center, take guided tours or self-guided walks.

For more information about the DNR's prescribed burns, visit Michigan.gov/FireManagement and click on the link to "Prescribed Fire Explained."

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