

**Prescribed Fires FAQs**  
**Austin Water Wildland Conservation Division-Prescribed Burning Program**  
**Water Quality Protection Lands**

Austin Water plans to conduct a prescribed burn on approximately 100 acres of the Water Quality Protection Lands in northern Hays County on Thursday, June 29, 2023. Smoke may be visible from FM 1826, State Highway 45, and RR 967.

**I see/smell smoke in the area?**

Austin Water is conducting a prescribed burn on Water Quality lands. Prescribed burns are conducted to manage the density of brush and to encourage the growth of native grasses on Water Quality Protection Lands. This type of land management helps to protect groundwater in Hays and Travis Counties.

**Who is conducting the burn?**

Austin Water is responsible for the burn and has wildland firefighters on staff and a certified burn manager. Crews often include partners from local fire departments and regional natural resource partners as well. All staff and assisting partners are required to meet the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) standards for the positions that they hold on the fire line. The manager supervising the prescribed burn is referred to as the burn boss and must be certified as an NWCG Burn Boss.

**It's really hot out. Is this a good time to burn? I'm concerned about [high temp./high fire danger/drought /dry brush /a recent wildfire on the news]?**

Prescribed burns can help us to reduce the risk of wildfire. Each prescribed burn only occurs within narrow environmental conditions (such as relative humidity, wind, fuel moisture, etc.) following strict protocols to conduct the burn safely. As a result, there are relatively few days each year that meet those rigorous conditions, and some of them are categorized as high-fire danger days. The professional fire managers will determine that those conditions are met before committing to a prescribed burn.

Air temperatures are hot, but thanks to all of the recent rains, plants in this area have good moisture content for a safe and effective prescribed burn. During times of extreme heat, crews start (and finish) the process of igniting the burn area earlier to avoid working near the fire in the hottest part of the day.

**How long will this fire take?**

The prescribed fire should take fewer than 6 hours to complete. The burned area will be extensively patrolled for a week after the fire.

**Why is there a prescribed fire?**

Prescribed burns are conducted to manage the density of brush and to encourage the growth of native grasses on the Water Quality Protection Lands to benefit groundwater resources.

The Water Quality Protection Lands were purchased with bond funds to protect the quality and quantity of water reaching the Barton Springs segment of the Edwards Aquifer. Research shows that grasslands and savannas are the most effective vegetation types to meet these goals. The majority of the Water Quality Protection Lands are being restored to or maintained as grasslands and savannas, which requires the integration of multiple land management treatments.

### **What is being done to make sure it is safe and won't get out of control?**

- Safety is the primary consideration when planning and implementing any prescribed burn.
- All and assisting partners are required to meet the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) standards for the positions that they hold on the fire line. The manager supervising the prescribed burn is referred to as the burn boss and must be certified as an NWCG Burn Boss.
- Partnerships are critical to the success of any fire operation. Prescribed burns may include individuals from Austin Water Utility, Austin Fire Department, local fire departments and multiple natural resource management partners.

### **Is the smoke safe?**

Prescribed fires do release significant amounts of emissions, primarily small particulate matter. However, fires are a normal and natural occurrence and by conducting prescribed fires we have greater control on when, where, and how much emissions are produced in comparison to a wildfire. The burn crew takes great care to monitor wind direction to minimize smoke on roads and neighboring communities as much as possible.

All regulations identified in the Outdoor Burning Rules are met and the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality is notified before each burn. No burning will take place on Ozone Action Days.

### **How is the smoke controlled?**

Smoke management is one of the key criteria for all prescribed burns. This type of smoke is often a nuisance but does not generally pose a health risk. Attention is focused on minimizing smoke impacts in adjacent neighborhoods and along the roadways.

In addition to minimizing the smoke impacts, all households within at least a half-mile of the burn unit are notified before the burn with a postcard and staff will notify individuals immediately before the burn if they request such a notification. In addition, signs are posted in the adjacent neighborhoods and directly communicate with sensitive populations such as schools. Finally, signs are posted on the roads to notify drivers of the potential for smoke. To sign up for email notifications about future prescribed burns, please visit [bit.ly/rxburnnotification](http://bit.ly/rxburnnotification).

### **How do you know this burn won't turn into a wildfire? / How will you keep this from turning into a wildfire?**

Our staff and partners are professional burn managers trained to the highest standards set by national wildfire experts. Each prescribed burn only occurs within narrow environmental conditions, following strict protocols to conduct the burn safely. The Austin Fire Department and several other partner agencies will be on-site to provide additional support.

### **How is the fire controlled?**

- A burn boss's first priority is to conduct a safe burn, which requires long hours of preparation.
  - Wind speed and direction, humidity and a host of other factors must meet safety requirements before a burn can begin. After establishing a perimeter of natural and hand-cleared firebreaks devoid of fuel, the crew will light a downwind backfire, which burns slowly as it moves into the wind.

- As the backfire burns away fuels, it creates a black line. The crew patrols the firebreak perpendicular to the backfire, establishing a handline, where an igniter will use a drip torch to set a flank fire to clear fuels along the handline.
- When the flank fire has burned away enough fuel, an igniter will set the head fire along the windward firebreak.
- Fueled by the wind, the head fire typically burns quickly but extinguishes itself by burning straight into the backfire.

