

Prescribed Burns – Spring 2012

The Windsor-Essex Parkway will provide more than 300 acres (120 hectares) of green space. The green space will feature an overall Carolinian theme, focusing on protection and expansion of Tallgrass Prairie and Oak Savannah habitats. Prescribed burns – deliberately set, carefully controlled and closely monitored fires – are the most effective management tool for Tallgrass Prairie maintenance, conservation and restoration.

Prescribed burns are planned this spring on several sites totalling approximately 6.95 hectares of the existing Parkway green space.

The Importance of Tallgrass Prairie and Oak Savannah

Tallgrass Prairie and Oak Savannah ecosystems in Windsor are grasslands with a high diversity of plants, birds, mammals and insects, including a number of species that are considered to be rare, threatened or endangered in Ontario. Tallgrass Prairie and Oak Savannah are among the most endangered ecosystems in Canada with less than one per cent of their original extent remaining. Windsor's Ojibway Prairie Complex is one of the largest protected prairie complexes in Ontario.

Why Fire is Essential for Tallgrass Prairie Habitats

Prescribed burns are carried out on a regular basis throughout Windsor and Essex County for the purpose of restoration and management of Tallgrass Prairie habitats.

Without a regular fire regime, over time, woody vegetation will displace prairie plants. Fire leaves the ground covered with black ash. This warms the soil and stimulates the germination and growth of deeply rooted native prairie plants. It also removes less fire-tolerant invasive species which are not part of a prairie community.

Controlling the burns

The spring 2012 Parkway prescribed burns will occur in the Chappus Street and Oakwood Bush areas between March 1 and April 10, 2012. The burns will be conducted in accordance with permits issued under the *Endangered Species Act, 2007*. A detailed burn plan has been prepared for each block of Tallgrass Prairie to be burned.

Wildfire Specialists Inc., a partially local company, is conducting the burns on behalf of the Windsor Essex Mobility Group (WEMG) and Parkway Infrastructure Constructors (PIC). PIC has obtained a permit to proceed from the City of Windsor Fire Prevention Officer.

The spread of fire and smoke will be controlled by ensuring that burns take place only when the weather, wind speed and direction, and atmospheric conditions specified in the detailed burn plans are present. This means that although several Tallgrass Prairie patches have been identified for burning this year, it may not be possible to complete all of the prescribed burns. If this is the case, the burns will be held until next year.

A six-week window has been set for the burns. For each burn patch, it is anticipated that the ignition phase of burn will last less than 15 minutes. Each burn is expected to last for a maximum of 20 minutes. The burn patch will then be monitored until the burn is declared out by the lead burn expert, known as the burn boss.

Safety is the central focus for prescribed burns. The Parkway burns are considered to be low complexity because the individual patches being burned are small, the fuel load is low, and the expected burn time for each patch is short. As with any burn, the highest safety measures are being employed.

On the day that it has been determined that a burn can take place:

- A briefing is held for all on-site trained staff, local Emergency Service Providers and other key personnel. An overview of the operation, equipment, escape routes, safety zones, communications procedures, ignition and suppression plans and anticipated fire behaviour is provided.
- This site is reviewed to ensure all combustible material has been cleared from the boundaries of the burn patch, exclusion fencing is erected and other measures to mitigate the spread of fire are in place.
- Species at risk specialists inspect the site immediately prior to the burn and are on-site during the burn.
- The travelling public are made aware of the burn through the installation of on-site signage and the dispatching of OPP cruisers adjacent to the burn patch. Security personnel stationed at key locations will ensure pedestrians do not inadvertently enter the burn patch. No lane closures or other traffic restrictions are required during the burns. In the unlikely case that smoke blows onto the roadway, traffic will be warned immediately through the use of portable variable message signs and detoured as necessary.
- The equipment on hand includes drip torches and fuel (a handheld incendiary device that releases slow-burning flaming fuel at a predetermined rate), fuses, walkie-talkies, backpack pumps (a portable water container equipped with a hand pump and backpack straps carried on the back of firefighters, used for applying water during fire suppression), shovels, and first aid kits.

Frequency and Timing of Burns

Prescribed burns are an ongoing management technique to maintain healthy, functioning prairie ecosystems. Rather than prescribing a burning frequency (for example, every two years), the timing for burns in areas within the Parkway footprint will be determined and adapted based on management objectives and site-specific conditions. Generally, as the prairie community matures, the fire frequency can be reduced. Given the Parkway's location in southwestern Ontario, it is anticipated that in years when prescribed burns occur, they will be carried out in early spring.

More information

The Ojibway Nature Centre (5200 Matchette Road, Windsor) and Canada South Science City (930 Marion Avenue, Windsor) have valuable information on display about the Carolinian and Tallgrass Prairie ecosystems and the need for prescribed burns.

If the public has any concerns regarding prescribed burns or other aspects of the Parkway, please contact or visit the Public Liaison Office at 1-877-937-5929, 2187 Huron Church Road Suite 340, or wep-plo@wemq.ca.

Please visit www.weparkway.ca to learn more about the Windsor-Essex Parkway. Updates are posted on Twitter (www.twitter.com/weparkway) and photos and videos are posted on Flickr (www.flickr.com/weparkway) and YouTube (www.youtube.com/weparkway).

Reference documents:

http://tallgrassontario.org/TS_SAR.htm

"Caring for Nature in Essex" by the Carolinian Canada Coalition

<http://www.ojibway.ca/index.htm>

Windsor-Essex Parkway Landscape Plan