Dry spring weather leads to unsafe burning conditions

Communities and counties across the Midwest have initiated burning restrictions or bans in the past few weeks. A mild winter with little snow accumulation followed by dry, windy, and unseasonably warm temperatures have created dangerous conditions for field and ditch burning this spring.

Key factors in conducting a safe burn include monitoring wind direction and wind speed, temperature, and relative humidity. The Iowa State University Extension and Outreach office outlines when it's not advisable to burn.*

When not to burn:

- Do not burn when smoke will blow toward or linger over populated areas, major roads/highways. Winds should be between 5 to 15 mph for prairies and 20 to 25 mph for woodlots and savanna. Wind direction should be checked.
- Never burn without first checking the National Fire Weather Forecast at http://www.srh.noaa.gov/ridge2/fire/. No burning should occur if the area is under a "fire weather watch" or "red flag warning." Burning should also not occur within 24 hours before or after a major frontal change as shifts in wind direction and speed create an unstable atmosphere.
- Avoid burning during periods of drought. Relative humidity should be from 35 to 55 percent for prairies and 20 to 50 percent for forested areas.
- Do not initiate burning early in the morning. Burns should begin after 9 a.m. as relative humidity is the lowest in the morning and has the quickest rate of change. Mixing height (height at which the smoke will mix with the atmosphere) peaks during mid to late afternoon.

Controlling an open burn

When weather conditions are advisable for open burning, taking safety precautions will help ensure flames stay where they should.

"Open burning should never be conducted within 100 feet of any building or structure, including grain bins and related grain handling equipment. A fire stop should be created around the entire perimeter of the area where open burning is to be conducted," explains Larry Gallagher, director of Corporate Loss Control at Grinnell Mutual.

Fire stops can be created by maintaining a mowed green area of 20 feet wide around the perimeter of the area to be burned or disking a 20 feet wide strip around the perimeter of the burn area.

"Either option should help to reduce the fire from jumping to an adjacent field or property," says Gallagher. "In addition developing a fire stop, ignite the area to be burned on three to four different

sides so that the fire will burn to the center of the area and burn itself out. That also helps control unwanted fire spread."

Lastly, contact your local fire department to discuss your plans to control fire spread and ask if they have any additional suggestions. Counties, municipalities, and other areas have restrictions on when burning can occur or may require special burn permits. For more information about safely conducting a controlled fire, visit the ISU Extension and Outreach website at http://www.extension.iastate.edu/article/publications-focus-plan-safety-prescribed-burns.

This safety message is brought to you by Farm Mutual Insurance Company and Grinnell Mutual Reinsurance Company (grinnellmutual.com). Contact Farm Mutual at phone or website to learn how a local business can protect your property.

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