

Prescribed Fire—Frequently Asked Questions

Why are prescribed fires needed?

Fire is a natural part of Florida's ecosystem, historically set by lightning. Because of this history of periodic fires many of Florida's natural communities are adapted to burning. Fire removes old vegetation, promotes new growth of native vegetation and suppresses the growth of non-native invasive plants. In the absence of fire many plant communities are displaced by dense, woody vegetation which can reduce plant diversity and eliminate foraging opportunities for the island's wildlife. Species such as the gopher tortoise, eastern indigo snakes, and the Sanibel rice rat all depend on a fire maintained ecosystem. In addition to the natural benefits of fire, carefully planning and conducting managed burns can prevent the likelihood of catastrophic wildfires and help preserve the natural ecology of the area. This technique, called "prescribed fire," reduces the amount of vegetation – or "fuel"—that would be available in the event of a wildfire.

What is a fire prescription?

A burn plan, or "prescription," details the required conditions that must exist in order for a prescribed burn to take place. These include environmental conditions such as soil moisture, fuel conditions, and recent rainfall as well as forecasted and actual weather conditions including temperature, relative humidity, wind speed and wind direction. Following a predefined prescription allows fire management officers to establish the desired fire behavior (intensity, flame length, direction of fire spread and smoke). The prescription also identifies the number of qualified fire personnel needed to conduct the burn as well as the types and number of equipment required to safely complete the burn. All prescribed fires must be authorized by the Florida Forest Service on the morning of the scheduled burn. A change in the forecast conditions may result in cancellation of the planned burn. A prescribed fire will NOT be conducted if the prescription conditions cannot be met prior to ignition or if conditions change after the prescribed fire has been ignited.

Why can't prescribed burns be conducted some other time?

The window of opportunity for conducting prescribed burns in southwest Florida is very narrow and may vary from year to year. By mid to late spring, soils and fuels are often too dry and prescribed fires may be prohibited by State authorities. By mid- to late summer, soils on Sanibel are often too wet, humidity is high, and afternoon thunderstorms render wind conditions unsuitable. Plus, on any given day all the conditions detailed in the prescription must be met and personnel and resources must be available to conduct the burn. To maximize our opportunities for conducting prescribed fires, the Sanibel Prescribed Fire Task Force has identified a number of priority burn sites for 2025. Because the prescription requirements for each site are different, this provides us with the flexibility to determine if the forecast conditions will meet the prescription requirements for any of the priority burns sites and then to schedule the prescribed fire accordingly.

What can I expect on the day of a prescribed burn?

Depending on the wind direction and strength, it may be possible to see or smell smoke. The fire prescription identifies the specific wind conditions necessary to achieve the burn objectives while minimizing smoke impacts to roads and communities. However, smoke and ash associated with a prescribed burn cannot be prevented. Smoke sensitive individuals should keep

their windows closed and avoid outdoor activities in the affected areas. If you would like to be registered on the City's list of smoke sensitive individuals, please contact Joel Caouette in the City's Natural Resources Department at (239) 267-4726. Once registered, the City will notify you in advance of any prescribed burn on Sanibel.

During the prescribed burn operations, residents and visitors are encouraged to:

- close windows
- cover pools
- move cars and furniture indoors
- stay indoors to minimize the impacts from smoke
- visit other areas of the Island away from the burn site
- abide by all signs, road closures, and instructions about closed areas provided by law enforcement and fire personnel

After the prescribed burn has been completed, there may be occasional smoke or burning embers seen from the burned area for several days. Fire personnel will monitor the burned area and adjacent roads, day and night, taking all precautions and maintaining readiness to minimize fire activity and smoke impacts to the public. Do not be alarmed if you see smoke or burning embers within a burned area.

Is Sanibel at risk for wildfires?

Yes! However, prescribed fires, planned and carefully conducted by well-trained and experienced fire personnel are a cost-effective way to reduce fuel loads on Sanibel and reduce the risk of a catastrophic wildfire. To address safety and wildland fire issues on Sanibel, the City of Sanibel, the Sanibel Fire and Rescue District, the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation, and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge formed the "Sanibel Firewise Task Force." To reduce the risk of wildfire around your home, the Sanibel Firewise Task Force recommends that you:

- Trim dead palm fronds from trees
- Trim tall grasses near the home
- Prune large, leafy hardwood trees so the lowest branches are six to ten feet above the ground
- Do not store combustible materials such as gasoline containers, firewood, and building supplies under or around the home, and
- Keep mulch and other landscaping material well watered

For additional information regarding fire and prescribed burning on Sanibel, please contact the Natural Resources Department at (239) 472-3700.