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NEWS RELEASE - FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

PRESCRIBED BURNING: A VALUABLE MANAGEMENT TOOL

In mid April, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) at the Fergus Falls Wetland Management District will begin its annual spring burning of native grasses on Waterfowl Production Areas. Fire is an essential management tool to maintain and enhance the vitality and biodiversity of the native tall grass prairie ecosystem. Periodic spring fires reduce the accumulation of dead plant material (litter) in the prairies and minimize competition from introduced nonnative species. Once the litter layer is removed, essential nutrients, such as nitrogen and phosphorus, that are present in the ash become available for plant uptake. The blackened earth that results from the fire absorbs more heat energy from the sun and the heated soil induces earlier sprouting of the native warm season grasses and forbs. Earlier sprouting results in maximum seed production which increases reproduction of native prairie plants and insures the perpetuation of the prairie.

Prior to the arrival of the European settlers on the Great Plains, periodic wildfires caused by lightning and fires set by Native Americans, burned millions of acres of tallgrass prairie each year. The tallgrass prairie ecosystem evolved with fire over several million years and most

native species became adapt to fire. Periodic uncontrolled fires were the main driving force that maintained the integrity of the tallgrass prairie ecosystem by keeping back the invasion of woody plant species.

On a much smaller scale, the Fergus Falls WMD burning program is attempting to replicate the events that took place historically on the tallgrass prairie. The District burns 3,000 to 5,000 acres of seeded and remnant native prairies each spring. Newly seeded areas are burned the third and fourth years after seeding, and every 4 to 7 years thereafter. Remnant native prairies are also burned on a 4 to 7 year cycle and are often harvested after a burn to provide seed for future seedings. Occasionally, the USFWS burns privately-owned native prairies for seed harvest purposes.

To insure safety and proficiency, prescribed burns are carefully planed and conducted under the proper wind and weather conditions. Each burn crew consists of a burn boss and 6 to 10 trained and experienced crew members. The burn crews are furnished with the proper equipment to conduct each burn safely. Firebreaks are mowed around all critical areas and fire pumper trucks are used on all firelines. Through a cooperative effort, the USFWS may combine forces with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources burn crew to complete larger more complicated burns.

Fires have been an integral part of the ecology of the native tallgrass prairie for millions of years. Hopefully through education and increased public support, land management agencies will be able to continue to use prescribed fires as a beneficial management tool.