

# Iowa DNR News

CONSERVATION AND RECREATION

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**April 15, 2025**

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**Hands-on learning, habitat work goal of annual burn week**



HAMBURG, Iowa – The torches were lit and the fire crew spread out off the east side of Bluff Road in southwest Fremont County where, on this early April afternoon, this 12-member team would be using prescribed fire on the 170-acre Eli Slusher Wanamaker Tract – a mix of prairie, grassland and timber – as part of the Loess Hills cooperative burn week.

“Keep a good pace,” shouted Kody Wohlers, Loess Hills Land Stewardship director for the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, who was serving as incident commander for the week.

Loess Hills cooperative burn week, now in its 10<sup>th</sup> year, provides hands-on fire management and training for all experience levels. The 2025 project took place in the southern Loess Hills, in Fremont, Mills and Pottawattamie counties. To learn more about the Loess Hills cooperative burn week, go to the [DNR's YouTube channel](#).

“Participants have the opportunity to gain experience in different roles from incident command, to firing boss to line boss, through planning, prepping, going through safety reviews and the fire execution,” said Doug Chafa, wildlife biologist with the

Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Missouri River Wildlife Unit and one of the organizers of the annual event. “Training is the primary focus but a side benefit is we get all the ecological benefits of fire on the landscape.”

Attendees came from 12 states and Canada, from 45 conservation agencies and organizations including numerous Iowa county conservation boards, The Nature Conservancy, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Audubon Society, Henry Doorly Zoo, Pheasants Forever, city parks departments, students from Kirkwood Community College, Iowa State University and Upper Iowa University, and volunteers and numerous rural volunteer fire departments and more.

The goal of the week was to provide attendees with real world, hands-on experience in all phases of planning and executing a prescribed fire while applying fire on the landscape. For some, it was their first time on the fire line, for others, it was serving in a new role. All under the direction of a highly experienced team.

Each day began with a meeting in the Waubonsie State Park lodge, that would go through the daily schedule – hazard tree work, classroom work, live fire – depending upon the weather. As the participants broke into their smaller groups, the dozen members of Division Pink met outside the lodge for a briefing before splitting into their burn group.

After gearing up with their protective fire equipment, the burn group met by the main engine to go through burn maps and progression of the fire, potential hazards, escape plans, fire objective, medical event and radio check. They were waiting for humidity levels to drop after a steady rain passed through the area the day before.

“Rehab the torches, rehab the water, use this time for scouting, we don’t have idle time - always be doing something,” instructed Wohlers.

This fire would be directed by firing boss in training, Sarah Ratay, from The Nature Conservancy Oregon, who was working alongside John McAndrews, group leader from the Iowa DNR’s Missouri River Wildlife Unit. After arriving at the burn site, the crew did walk-throughs at each ignition point, re-reviewed the plan, pointed out the hazards and did another radio check.

Since the fire would be adjacent to Bluff Road, the Iowa DNR’s local conservation officers were engaged to provide traffic control.

Once lit, the actual fire took two hours to cover 170 acres. A morning's worth of preparation and planning was put into action.

"We do a lot of planning on the front end to make sure the execution day and the operation goes smoothly, efficiently and very timely. It's all in the planning and the prep, and the operation day is just the fun day," said Wohlers.

Loess Hills cooperative burn week was held March 31 – April 4, and headquartered at the lodge in Waubonsie State Park. Fire projects were conducted on an estimated 2,651 acres in Fremont, Mills and Pottawattamie counties, along with Washington County, Neb. Funding for this event is provided by The Fire Learning Network, the Loess Hills Alliance, The Gilchrist Foundation and the participating agencies.

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## **Well designed, actively managed CRP benefits pheasants and more**

Smoke plumes on the horizon is evidence that its peak season for annual prescribed fire across the state. Prescribed fire is the most cost-effective way to manage land enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), providing ecological benefits to native plantings which in turn, benefit wildlife, and in particular, pheasants.

"Managing CRP is important in order to maintain quality habitat for pheasants, namely the brood rearing and nesting cover it provides," said Todd Bogenschutz, upland wildlife biologist for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR). "And ideally that will take place before May 1, when we get into nesting season, but if that's not possible, then hopefully the burn plan will leave some habitat to allow pheasants to relocate."

Disking or disking and inter seeding are also management options, but neither are as fast or cost effective as fire.

To maximize benefits, the CRP field should incorporate a portion of the area dedicated to winter cover, like switchgrass and or shelterbelts, in addition to a well-placed food plot. Shelterbelts are a mix of shrubs and conifers – preferably four rows of each – that provide an escape during harsh winters, where the birds can loaf and have thermal cover, away from predators and out of the weather.

“Research by Iowa State shows that eight rows of shrubs and conifers can stand up to the worst Iowa winter. As far as the species of shrubs, pheasants care more about the shrub structure than the species, but we encourage natives, like wild plums or ninebark or dogwoods,” he said. “The shrubby plants should be less than 15 feet tall, to avoid being a raptor perch.”

The Iowa DNR’s State Forest Nursery in Ames has a selection of native conifers and shrubs available for order online at <https://www.iowadnr.gov/programs-services/forestry-resources/state-forest-nursery>.

“Ideally, the food plots would be located adjacent to the shelterbelt – think of it like putting the kitchen next to the bedroom. Pheasants can move to and from the food plot with minimal exposure,” he said. “Pheasants Forever has food plot mixes that work well. It’s also hard to beat corn. We see a lot of sorghum and soybeans as food plots – songbirds will use the sorghum, but not the soybeans, but the beans are not as tall as corn and can get buried in heavy snow.”

Food plots should be a minimum of two acres for pheasants. If deer are involved, it should be five to 10 acres, he said. Food plots can go fallow and come up in weeds for a year and will still offer the food component and habitat benefits.

“The layout works better if shelterbelts and food plots are not next to woody timber – but away from it, on the open side of the field,” Bogenschutz said.

Iowa has enjoyed a string of mild winters, which can really make the pheasant population jump, especially when followed by a warm dry spring nesting season.

“We don’t really know when the bad winters are coming, but need to be prepared. We have to keep the hens alive through the bad winters, because dead hens don’t nest in the spring,” he said. “The twelve inches of rain we received last spring is hard to manage for, but we can put the quality habitat on the landscape and hope for the best.”

Quality CRP benefits other species as well, like songbirds and pollinators, and snakes and salamanders, if water is nearby. In north central Iowa, deer will use CRP to bed down. It also serves as nesting sites for ducks and Canada geese, and can help to improve water quality by reducing runoff and erosion.

“Our primary ecosystem was prairie, and CRP will benefit our native wildlife species,” he said.

Information on CRP and how to manage it is available from the Iowa DNR’s Wildlife staff and private lands staff, USDA – Farm Service Agency, Pheasants Forever and USDA Service Centers, or online at [www.iowadnr.gov/programs-services/wildlife-landowner-assistance/conservation-reserve-program](http://www.iowadnr.gov/programs-services/wildlife-landowner-assistance/conservation-reserve-program)

## **A century of pheasant hunting**

The Iowa DNR and Pheasants Forever are celebrating 100 years of pheasant hunting in the Hawkeye State. The first season was held Oct. 20-22, 1925, when 13 counties in north central Iowa were opened to pheasant hunting. Hunters were allowed a three-rooster limit, for a half-day of hunting. An estimated 75,000 hunters participated.

Hunters can commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary by purchasing a hard card featuring Iowa Pheasants Forever Print of the Year when they purchase their 2025 hunting and fishing licenses.

Information on places to hunt, the August roadside survey results and more is available online by clicking the 100 Years of Pheasant Hunting graphic at [www.iowadnr.gov/pheasantsurvey](http://www.iowadnr.gov/pheasantsurvey).

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## **Stay safe paddling this spring**

Early spring paddling can provide solitude, exercise and an opportunity to see amazing wildlife. Extra precautions are needed to stay safe with unpredictable

spring weather and fluctuating temperatures and river levels.

After heavy rains, water levels can rise quickly and produce strong and fast current. Stay away from strainers and sweepers—wood or branch piles—deadly hazards that can pull a paddler under or pin them underwater. These are usually found on outside river bends where currents are strongest. Review these simple safety tips before you head out on the water.

- Check your canoe or kayak for any needed repairs or maintenance after being stored for several months. Look for holes and leaks and make sure all hatch lids fit snug and securely. Check your paddle blades for signs of cracking or splitting.
- Wear a life jacket at all times while on the water, regardless of your swimming ability. Inspect your life jacket to make sure all buckles and zippers work properly. Replace the life jacket if it has damage that cannot be repaired.
- Dress for the water temperature, not the air temperature. Air temperatures may feel warm in early spring, but the water is still dangerously cold. Wear a wetsuit or dry suit, along with layers, to help avoid hypothermia or cold water shock. Do not wear cotton clothing—it fails to insulate when wet. Choose synthetics or wool. Dress in layers so you can peel a layer off if overheated.
- Always bring along a dry bag with a complete set of extra clothes you can change into if you get wet, a first-aid kit and a protected cell phone or weather radio. Get out of wet, cold clothing as soon as possible. Pack plenty of water to stay hydrated.
- Let a friend or loved one know where you are going and when you are expected to return. It will be easier to find you if you need help.

Get tips for planning a fun and safe paddling trip on the DNR webpage at [www.iowadnr.gov/planyourtrip](http://www.iowadnr.gov/planyourtrip).

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