BURNING

Fire is the natural way to maintain prairie plants and prevent the natural succession of plant communities to turn into shrubby areas, then young woodlands and finally mature forests. This natural succession can be observed in any of the growing bends in the Great Miami River as it passes through the Oxbow where new soil is laid down from the slower water moving on the inside of the bend while at the same time soil is being ripped away by the faster water moving on the outside of the bend.

The succession is modified and made more difficult by constant flooding which forces the succession toward plants tolerant of occasional submersion and constantly wet roots. Not every grass, shrub, or tree is cut out to survive the insults of frequent flooding. Fire is the best way to encourage grass to grow and discourage shrub and tree growth. Fire is not that easy to use as a tool in the floodplain. Fire depends on the detritus layered between plant stems to carry the fire along the ground between plants. Usually most of the combustible material lies in this ground layer with only a low percentage of combustible material in the upright plants. When the ground layer burns it heats the ground for a few inches below the surface and the heat kills the roots of many shrubs and trees. Grasses whose roots often lie several feet below the surface are essentially unaffected.

The problem with burning a floodplain prairie is that the ground layer may not be present. Even if the standing plants are dry enough to burn, floods may have washed away all the ground level detritus making it nearly impossible for a fire to sustain itself. That leaves mowing as the next best method, but since you lose the damage done to the roots by fire it is far less efficient and much more expensive.

For more information, visit www.oxbowinc.org or call 812-290-2941.

For assistance in the event of an emergency, please call 911 (make sure you advise you are in Indiana) or the Dearborn County Sheriff's Dispatch at (812) 537-3431