

BOOK REVIEW

Conducting Prescribed Fires—A Comprehensive Manual. By John R. Weir. 2009. Texas A&M University Press, College Station, Texas, USA. 194 p. US\$28. paperback. ISBN 978-1-60344-134-6.

Empowering land managers working to reinvigorate vanishing fire cultures in our increasingly complex environment is well fleshed out in this book by John Weir. The need for and benefits of prescribed fire are becoming better understood, but at the same time the many obstacles to treating land with fire are growing. Additionally, fire practitioners must battle the 70-year-old, yet still highly successful, “Smokey Bear” public-relations campaign that continues to define perceptions of and resistance to fire of any kind. This manual consists of 16 chapters that thoroughly explore topics such as public relations, laws and liability, smoke management, burn planning, and actual prescribed-fire implementation. To overcome the challenges of implementing this inherently dangerous management action so that we are able to realize the goals of bringing appropriate fire to the vast spatial scales that are needed, we must approach each burn as if something unfortunate will happen and as if it will be the last we are allowed to conduct. In his book Weir takes this big-picture approach and thoughtfully addresses virtually every facet of prescribed-fire management, and the safety of the public and those on the fire line is a common thread throughout. A manual such as this has been much needed, and the author should be applauded for this effort.

Any reader will be engaged with and will benefit from the lessons shared by this highly experienced burner, and many chapters, such as his presentation of smoke management, are undeniably informative. However, at times it is difficult to ascertain the author’s intended audience, from the beginner to the experienced, and this leads to some confusion. For instance, professional fire practitioners will take exception to much of the content, but this should not detour them from thoroughly digesting the book because this is an excellent summary as well as a refresher for many training sessions. Granted, this is a manual and not a treatise, but perhaps some attention could have been given to the economic and ecological goals that may prompt a private landowner reading this book to use fire for the first time, or that may assist the governmental official or the public at large who needs to understand these concepts to support the beneficial role of fire on certain landscapes. Still images from an excellent video demonstrating ignition techniques are included, but in book format simple diagrams would have been more informative. Weir gained his fire experience on the Great Plains, and this book is heavily biased toward that region, and therefore I cannot endorse it as comprehensive.

Nevertheless, as I neared the end of the book I realized that both a private landowner wanting to burn a small pasture for the first time or the professional burning thousands of acres per year would benefit greatly from reading this book, and I began thinking of all the people with whom I want to share it. I will always keep my copy at hand, and I consider it a valuable reference; however, given the notes I wrote in the margins of virtually every page, I do look forward to a second edition.

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