

Other Viewpoints

Pasture burns should be flexible

Equal parts stewardship, business and ritual, the controlled spring burns of the Kansas prairie command respect and inspire awe.

The burns are arguably God's work, refreshing the ecosystem as they renew the land for grazing. When the Flint Hills turn smoky every spring, it seems like part of the natural order of things.

For some, though, it can seem impossible to breathe. Burns have put Wichita's air-pollution level over federal limits three times recently, stoking worries about the region's ability to comply with the even stricter federal ozone limits ahead.

Unlike the Icelandic volcano, say, prairie burns are man-made and therefore can be managed — making their hazardous side effects subject to regulation, negotiation and change.

With the burns affecting the state's ability to comply with tighter Environmental Protection Agency standards, the next steps must be collaborative and farsighted.

It isn't reasonable to expect to get a pass on federal air-quality standards because of the seasonal burns, which was the aim of a resolution passed by the Legislature and a bill introduced in Congress by Rep. Jerry Moran, R-Hays.

So it's good to know that the Kansas Department of Health and Environment is working with agriculture organizations, ranchers and EPA and other public officials toward making some changes before next year's burning begins. The next meeting is expected to be in Emporia in July.

Josh Tapp, chief of air planning and development for the federal agency's Region 7 office in Kansas City, is surely right in suggesting that "the best ideas are going to come from Kansas and not the EPA." Nobody is suggesting that the burning end, which would allow woody growth to take over and spell the end of the tallgrass prairie as we know it.

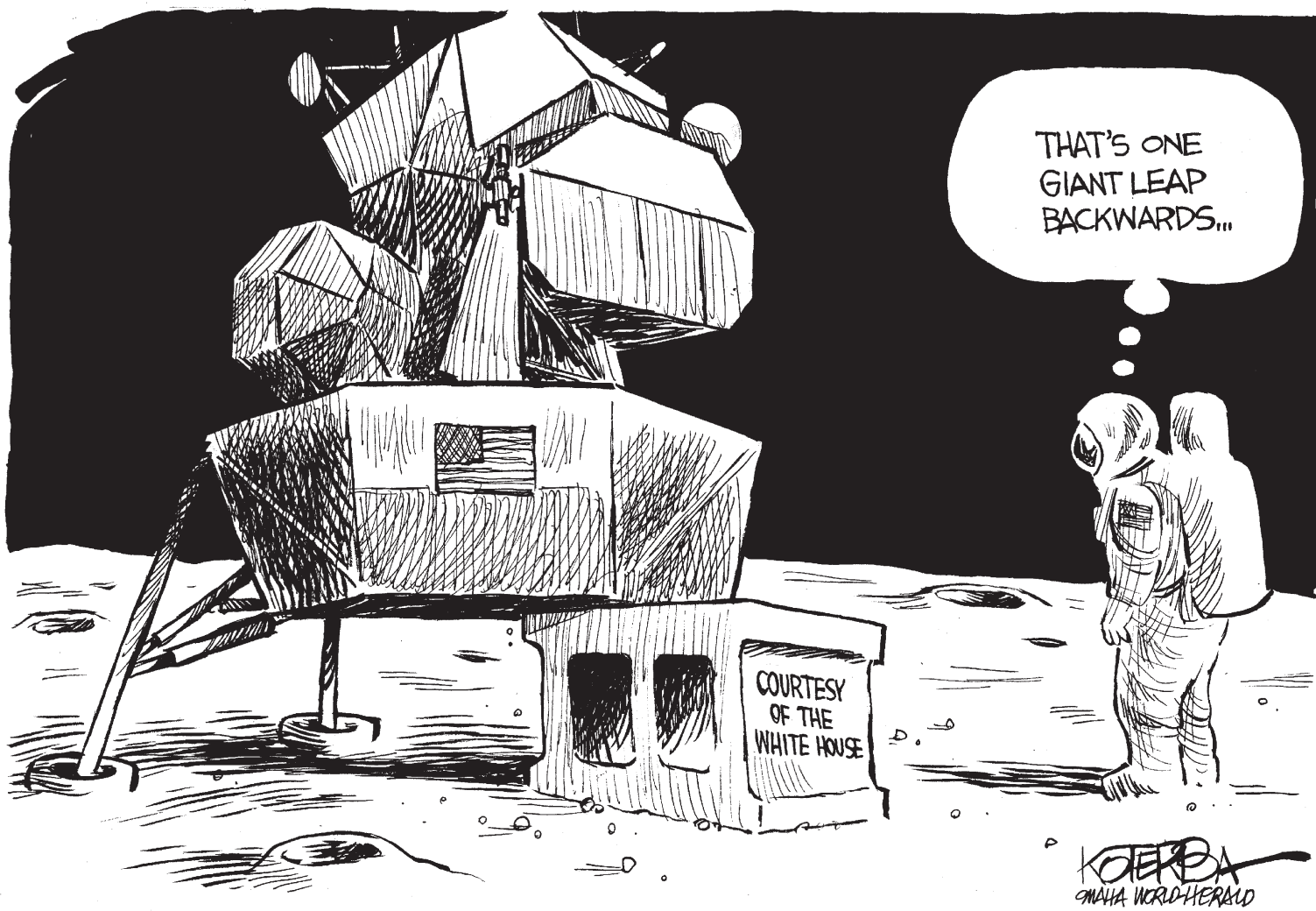
But there appears to be room to debate how frequent the burning needs to be. Patch burning continues to sound promising — when a third of a pasture is burned and used for grazing each year, usually with an eye to improving wildlife habitat.

A Kansas State University study has indicated that cattle weight gains are "very, very similar," whether they're grazed on pastures that have had patch burning or full burns. Perhaps there's a way to ramp up research for next spring and beyond, to see whether data confirms what sounds like common sense.

Sentiment for landowner rights runs deep in Kansas, and especially in the Flint Hills. But at its worst, such as last year, prairie burning leads to warnings that children, older adults and people with asthma and other lung diseases limit how long they're outside and how much they exert themselves there.

Smoke-obstructed highways and burns that go out of control are public-safety issues as well. All of which makes prairie burns and their management a shared concern and responsibility.

— The Wichita Eagle, via The Associated Press



'Main Street' looks healthy still

I heard someone refer to "Main Street" in passing the other day.

This was here in Colby. Colby — with no street named "Main."

A little superficial research indicates that Colby never named a street named "Main," yet kids have gone out to "drag Main" for decades — first along Franklin Avenue, then along Fourth Street, and more recently along Range.

Having grown up in a town with a real Main Street, this gives me a chuckle. Main Street, for me, was the route that connected the college to downtown, then crossed the railroad tracks and kept going, past the baseball diamonds, past the fair grounds, past the sale barn and on into the country.

Other towns have other main drags, but all serve to anchor the center of a town, much as a spine anchors a body. That main drag goes through the central business district.

The central business district — downtown — has been transformed in the past 50 years. As habits have changed, towns had to change with them. Those that don't suffer the consequences.

Take, for example, Scottsbluff, Neb. It's not as big as Hays, but serves as an important regional hub in much the same manner. When I was a child, it had a number of big, downtown stores — Montgomery Ward's and Penney's



Marian Ballard

• Collection Connections

and Woolworth's — all on a main drag named Broadway.

Habits changed, and when I was last there in 2001, many of those downtown buildings stood empty, replaced by a mall at the edge of town. The mall was built next to a highway bypass, which was built to route through traffic around congested downtown traffic.

We see similar patterns in Colby. The Interstate was built close to town, but not so close as to actually have to handle much local traffic. Businesses looked at all those lovely cars and trucks and campers bypassing town and decided to try to get them to leave a few of their lovely dollars here as they flew by. But this is a small town, with small businesses. In a city, a store may have two locations. In Colby, a store usually can afford only one address. If more shoes or cars or paper towels can be sold next to the Interstate than downtown, the downtown address has to go.

So we have a new business district, around a new Main Street named I-70.

Left with a perfectly good old-downtown, what's a city to do?

I've been through a lot of small towns in Kansas and Nebraska. Some have a lot of empty buildings. Some have traditional downtown businesses hanging on for dear life, or reawakening a traditional sense of the community. Colby has some of these, retail establishments that make it worthwhile to park your car and take a stroll, dropping in to this or that store. It's more fun than going to a mall.

Colby has done something else with downtown, though. Studios, restaurants, and professionals of all sorts have found space to settle in.

I like that. I like knowing that storefronts don't sit empty, but find a new purpose. I like living in a town where people are able to imagine themselves into a space where a very different tenant used to be.

Take a walk downtown, along "Main Street." There's still life in the old town.

Marian Ballard has collected careers as counselor, librarian, pastor, and now copy editor for the Colby Free Press. She collects ideas, which are more portable than other stuff.

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Steve Haynes - Publisher
s.haynes @ nwkansas.com

NEWS

Kevin Bottrell - News Editor
kbottrell @ nwkansas.com

Andy Heintz - Sports Reporter
aheintz @ nwkansas.com

Marian Ballard - Copy Editor
mballard @ nwkansas.com

Vera Sloan and Aubrey Spencer - Society Editors
colby.society @ nwkansas.com

ADVERTISING

Heather Woofter - Advertising Representative
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Wheat give cause for overall optimism

Early projections for the 2010 Kansas wheat crop place the yield at 333 million bushels.

The crop is ahead of schedule in the central part of the state, from Pratt, Kiowa and Kingman counties north along Interstate 135 up to Ottawa County and west.

"I really like what I see across the state," says Kansas Farm Bureau commodities director Mark Nelson. "I'm a bit more bullish after having seen the Kansas crop. I believe we have an upside potential for a 350-million to 360-million-bushel crop."

Nelson was among about 60 people on the recent Wheat Quality Council tour of the state. For three days in early May, this group looked at the winter wheat crop in 95 percent of the counties in Kansas that have wheat planted.

Nelson says the crop has developed nicely in the cooler temperatures so far. He is quick to note that, as of May 10, it's way too early to take these estimates to the bank.

"While you can determine where the wheat crop is headed at this time, this crop will be made or missed out during the period from May 10 through June 20," he said. "A lot of things can still happen: storms with hail, drought, extreme temperatures and disease."

One thing is somewhat certain, however: this year's Kansas wheat harvest will be early. Some farmers will probably pull a combine



John Schlageck

• Insights

Kansas Farm Bureau

into the field sometime around June 7.

Overall soil moisture remains good across the state. The only really dry areas are in the extreme southwestern and east along the Oklahoma border.

Few disease problems exist at this time, although the tour group found some rust and a little bit of mosaic in the southern-tier counties. With continued cool weather and moisture in much of the state, however, rust could become a real problem.

Today's Kansas farmers keep a close watch on the possibility of disease in their wheat. Still, when faced with disease, they have to consider the decision to use fungicide and weigh the difference between the additional costs and the potential return.

Two significant differences in this year's crop were apparent on the tour, Nelson said. Those acres seeded during the regular planting period seem to be doing well — great tillering,

large heads in some cases and tremendous potential, he said.

On the other hand, those planted late, generally because of a wet fall, are behind in maturity. The crop is shorter and Nelson believes the yield potential will be also less than for earlier plantings.

Some farmers were asked if they planted all the acres they wanted last fall and most replied, "No."

"That may be one reason we saw a drop-off in acres planted from 9 million in 2009 to 8.6 million this year, the lowest number in Kansas since 1957," Nelson said. "We're a long way from putting this crop in the bin, but if this crop can get one more good drink and temperatures remain cooler, the upside potential for this wheat crop looks good."

How good?

No will know until the last combine leaves the field and the crop is safely in the bin. Nelson predicts that like any typical Kansas year, yields will vary from 20 bushels per acre and less all the way to 80 and more.

John Schlageck of the Kansas Farm Bureau is a leading commentator on agriculture and rural Kansas. He grew up on a diversified farm near Seguin, and his writing reflects a lifetime of experience, knowledge and passion.

Where to write, call

U.S. Sen. Pat Roberts, 109 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510. (202) 224-4774

U.S. Sen. Sam Brownback, 303 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510. (202) 224-6521

U.S. Rep. Jerry Moran, 2202 Rayburn House Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20515. (202) 225-2715 or Fax (202) 225-5124

State Rep. Jim Morrison, State Capitol Building, 300 SW 10th St. Room 274-W, Topeka, Kan. 66612. (785) 296-7676 e-mail: jmorriso@ink.org

web: www.morrisonfamily.com

State Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer, State Capitol Building, 300 SW 10th St., Room 225-E., Topeka, Kan. 66612, (785) 296-7399 ralph.ostmeyer@senate.state.ks.us

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

