

Best Practices: Burning Grass in the spring

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Photo: Emporia Gazette

Springtime throughout Cape Breton has something for almost all of all of our senses. We feel the warm, spring sun reach our faces at a new angle and intensity. We smell the unmistakable essence of burning grass in our neighbourhoods and fields. Exactly when the practice of burning grass started in farmers' fields and who started it is unclear but it may have evolved from an early practise of burning blueberry patches to increase production. This spring ritual takes place every year in fields and residential areas across the island despite the hazards and annual cautions. It is important to understand some basics and safety considerations about grass fires.

The evidence for burning grass to benefit fields is controversial. The Province of Nova Scotia has a website that provides useful information about why burning grass is not a good idea (see link). That said, there must be some compelling reasons for doing it because it has likely taken place for centuries. Prior to lighting any fire, you also need to check the NS Fire Index for your region daily (see link). This index changes quickly and often based on local weather conditions so frequent checks are a necessity. Furthermore, you should never burn grass, regardless of the fire index, if there are dry and/or windy conditions in the forecast.

If you initiate the burn, you need to make sure you have enough help during the event. Keep in mind that that "ideal conditions" can quickly change unexpectedly and unpredictably. It is your responsibility to make sure that the fire does not extend into the woods or to nearby structures. As a volunteer fireman for 15 years, I have seen this happen many times. You will need such items as shovels and/or heavy brooms to "snuff" or "beat" out the fire to channel its' progress. You also need an adequate supply of water that can be transported quickly to any area of the burn zone should the shovels or brooms not do the job. Many things can go wrong while burning grass in addition to the obvious dangers of smoke inhalation and serious burns. There are often hidden dangers in fields such as aerosol cans and other combustibles that can explode. Another overlooked danger of burning grass relates to the large volume of smoke created that can cause breathing difficulties and potential medical emergencies for people with asthma or other lung conditions.

If you do plan to burn fields or patches of grass near homes or other structures, you must make safety your number one priority. It is imperative that you do everything possible to (1) prevent property damage, (2) reduce the impact on local fauna (e.g. songbirds and reptiles), and (3) conduct any activity in a manner that will ensure no harm comes to you or anyone else. For homeowners and property owners who plan to burn their grass or who have neighbours who do so each spring, it is a good idea to make sure that you do not have combustible debris in the path of the planned grass fires. It is also advisable to limit the amount of tall grass near firewood or other valuable assets on your property. A good practice is to keep the grass cut low near such things in your yard to prevent fire from reaching them.

The only legal outdoor burning in Nova Scotia is that which takes place in a confined container (usually with a lid to act as a spark arrester) or small piles (see link), and this is all dependent on the fire index in your area. It is never a good idea to set fire to open fields. It can extend beyond your planned range because fire is so unpredictable and it changes because of local conditions that can increase its intensity, direction, and rate of spread. Also, bear in mind that local fire departments have limited resources and we hear of situations where fire departments were occupied extinguishing grass/brush fires when a report of a structure fire was received. This results in firefighters having to leave the grass fire, go back to the fire station to get the proper equipment to attend the structure fire (because grass/brush fires require different equipment and apparatus than structure fires), and then respond to the structure fire. All of this increases the response time to attend the structure fire. Furthermore, fighting grass/brush fires is physically demanding because they often occur in hot, dry weather, and this strains available human resources even further.

As a final word of caution about lighting open fires, you can be held responsible and charged under various Acts with significant consequences if your planned small fire extends into the woods or reaches other properties, regardless of whatever precautions you may have put in place.