

Smoke Advisory System Activated for 2023 – Flint Hills Prescribed Burns

Lincoln – The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) reminds Nebraskans that prescribed burning season is underway in Kansas, Oklahoma, and other states in the region, including Nebraska. Moreover, wildfires may occur at any time during the year. Smoke from these fires can negatively impact the air quality of downwind areas, including Nebraska.

DHHS announced the development of a public smoke advisory system in 2018 and will activate the system again this year. Smoke advisories will be issued when conditions make it likely that the smoke from prescribed burning and/or wildfires could significantly affect air quality in parts of Nebraska.

These advisories are developed in conjunction with the Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy (NDEE), DHHS, local health departments and districts, and information provided by multiple sources in the region.

Large areas of Flint Hills rangeland in Kansas and Oklahoma are burned to conserve and manage grasslands, woodlands, and wetlands. Prescribed burning also takes place on agricultural, Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), and public lands in the region. This practice can reduce hazardous fuel loads, restore and preserve natural wildlife habitats, provide better forage for cattle, and control invasive plant species. Prescribed burning minimizes the risk of wildfires and is effective in managing rangeland resources.

Landowners consider weather conditions when conducting prescribed burns and weather also can influence the degree to which air quality is compromised. During a typical year, about 2.4 million acres are burned in the Flint Hills region. In 2022, almost 2.1 million acres were burned and Nebraska experienced eight days of moderate air quality due to wind conditions.

The fuel load is near to slightly above normal this year across the Flint Hills, although variation is likely dependent on grazing practices. Current conditions range from abnormally dry to extreme drought throughout the area, which may decrease the number of acres burned this season.

Impacts on air quality may vary based on the type, size, and location of fires; impacts from prescribed burning may only last a few hours, whereas wildfire smoke can be persistent over consecutive days. Many factors, including weather conditions, affect the magnitude and duration of air quality impacts.

If state and local agencies determine that smoke is likely to significantly impact the air quality in Nebraska, DHHS and NDEE will issue a joint advisory to share the information with the public. Advisories will be based on data provided by multiple sources in the region including the National Weather Service, as well as smoke plume modeling and data from air quality monitors located in Omaha, Bellevue, Lincoln, Beatrice, Grand Island, and Scottsbluff. Advisories

will be posted on the NDEE website at <http://dee.ne.gov/NDEQProg.nsf/OnWeb/AirSA>, the DHHS website at <http://dhhs.ne.gov/pages/news-releases.aspx> and on NDEE and DHHS Facebook and Twitter accounts.

In addition to advisories from DHHS and NDEE, the Lincoln-Lancaster Health Department and the Douglas County Health Department may also issue information to advise citizens of air quality impacts in their jurisdictions.

Smoke can cause health problems, including burning eyes, runny nose, coughing, and illnesses such as bronchitis. Individuals with respiratory issues, such as asthma or COPD, pre-existing heart or lung diseases, along with children and the elderly may experience worse symptoms.






How Nebraskans can protect their health on days when smoke is present in their communities:

- Keep doors and windows closed and run air conditioners with HEPA filters.
- Stay hydrated by drinking plenty of water.
- Limit or avoid strenuous outdoor exercise.
- People with respiratory or heart-related illnesses should remain indoors.
- Contact your doctor if you have symptoms such as chest pain, chest tightness, shortness of breath, or severe fatigue.

Refer to the latest smoke advisory for additional information.

For current conditions of Nebraska's air quality and tomorrow's forecast, visit: <https://www.airnow.gov/>.

AirNow is a tool that uses the Air Quality Index (AQI) to report air conditions across the country. The AQI uses the following color chart to quickly communicate air quality:

Air Quality Index	Actions to Protect Your Health
 Good	None
Moderate	Unusually sensitive groups consider limiting prolonged/heavy exertion
 Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups	Sensitive groups should reduce prolonged/heavy outdoor exertion
 Unhealthy	Sensitive groups should avoid all physical outdoor activity
 Very Unhealthy	Everyone should avoid prolonged/heavy exertion
 Hazardous	Everyone should avoid all outdoor activity

For more information on smoke awareness, visit NDEE's website at <http://dee.ne.gov/NDEQProg.nsf/OnWeb/AirSA>.

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