

What the Surveys Show

Responses to surveys mailed at the conclusion of the 2007 REAP
“Prescribed Fire Education for Loess Hills Absentee Landowners” project

As the prescribed-fire education program for absentee landowners in the Loess Hills came to a close, both participants and non-participants were surveyed about the project. Their responses highlight helpful information about how landowners prefer to receive information, which outreach activities were most helpful to them, benefits gained through participation, and potential action that will be taken as a result of receiving conservation information. Additional written comments also reveal landowner attitudes and concerns about using prescribed fire in the Loess Hills.

A total of 281 surveys were mailed to Loess Hills absentee landowners in July 2007, near the conclusion of a one-year REAP outreach project. Reminder postcards were mailed two weeks later. Surveys were mailed to 92 landowners who participated in at least one educational opportunity and 29 were returned, a response rate of 32 percent. A total of 51 surveys were returned from landowners who did not participate in any of the available activities, a response rate of 27 percent from the 189 landowners who were surveyed.

Prior to mailing the surveys, absentee landowners who own land in the Loess Hills received numerous opportunities to receive conservation information. Activities that were offered to all landowners included small-group meetings, teleconferences and recordings of the phone calls, personal phone calls, informational three-ring binders, and on-site consultations. The purpose of the surveys was to determine the landowners’ level of participation and how beneficial they felt each activity was to them personally.

Participants

Among the 29 participants who returned surveys, 76 percent received the prescribed-fire binder and 41 percent visited by phone with a Conservation Connect representative. Five individuals, or 17 percent, attended one of the informational meetings in Sioux City or Omaha, and only one person took advantage of the teleconference or listened to a recording afterwards.

Participants were asked to rate the value of activities they took part in. Seventy-seven percent of respondents found the personal phone calls to be somewhat or very helpful. The most beneficial component was the informational binders, cited by 89 percent as somewhat or very helpful. Thirty-six percent of respondents rated the informational meetings helpful, while 22 percent benefited from the teleconferences. No one who responded to the survey took advantage of the opportunity for an on-site consultation.

Participants were asked how many acres they own that might benefit from fire. Fifty-six percent own from one to 200 acres in this category, while 16 percent own 200 or more acres they felt might benefit from prescribed fire.

Non-participants

The main reason cited for not participating in the project was being unavailable during the scheduled meetings or teleconferences (33 percent). One-quarter of non-participants who returned the survey said they rely heavily or exclusively on their farm operator or co-owner to make conservation decisions. Other reasons for not participating were lack of knowledge about the project (21 percent), not interested in prescribed fire (13 percent), already knowledgeable about fire (19 percent), and uncomfortable attending meetings or accessing a teleconferences (2 percent). Eleven other reasons were cited for not participating, most notably that the landowner already uses prescribed fire or they don't think it's appropriate for their land. Two written comments in particular illustrate some of the barriers against using prescribed fire:

One woman wrote, "I am interested in this because I grew up around here, but my husband is not from here and isn't interested. I can't do this by myself."

Another landowner who did not participate in the project wrote, "I have no idea why I would want to burn my property. (It) doesn't sound good to me. I have no idea who you are or why you are singling me out."

Among non-participants, 51 percent indicated they would be interested in future Conservation Connect programs on natural resource conservation, and another 27 percent said they might consider participation. Twenty-two percent said they were not interested in future programming.

Modes of receiving information

One of the main goals of this project was to better understand how people prefer to receive information. The surveys gave landowners the opportunity to check as many forms of communication as they preferred. Overwhelmingly, absentee landowners indicated they prefer to receive conservation information via a newsletter (75 percent). Complete responses to this question are shown in the tables below.

Participants' preferred modes of receiving information (25 respondents):

Form of communication	How often checked	% of total responses
Teleconference presentation	0	0%
One-on-one telephone calls	2	8%

Small-group meetings	5	20%
Video or DVD	6	24%
Toll-free Conservation Connect hotline	0	0%
Website or e-mail	5	20%
Newsletter	19	76%
Other (<i>please specify</i>)	2	8% (man-power, cost-share, materials by mail)

Non-participants' preferred modes of receiving information (*39 respondents*):

Form of communication	How often checked	% of total responses
Teleconference presentation	4	10%
One-on-one telephone calls	8	21%
Small-group meetings	6	15%
Video or DVD	10	26%
Toll-free Conservation Connect hotline	4	10%
Website or e-mail	17	44%
Newsletter	29	74%
Other (<i>please specify</i>)	3	8% (on-line course, personal visit)

Benefits & possible action

Landowners who took advantage of outreach activities were asked two additional questions related to benefits they gained through the project, and actions they might take as a result of their participation. Eighty-nine percent of respondents indicated they benefited through an increased knowledge of prescribed fire and its benefits, and 56 percent gained greater confidence to conduct a fire. Half of respondents indicated they feel greater motivation to use prescribed fire on their land, while a third benefited by learning about available technical assistance and cost-share opportunities.

Twelve individuals (60 percent of those who responded to the question) indicated they may conduct a fire on their land as a direct response to their participation in the Conservation Connect program. Based on the number of acres reported on the survey, this could result in prescribed fire being conducted on anywhere from 1,860 to 3,200 acres in the Loess Hills.

Other than actually conducting a controlled burn, landowners also mentioned other actions that may result from the program. Forty percent will use the information to verify their current land management decisions, while another 35 percent said they may contact the NRCS or SWCD for

technical or financial assistance. One landowner commented that he is waiting for the state to burn forestland that adjoins his property, while another wrote that he's been interested in prescribed fire for several years but hasn't actually conducted a fire.

Additional Comments

Both groups surveyed were given an opportunity to make suggestions at the end of the survey form. Comments from participants may be valuable in planning future outreach projects.

“No one currently employed to help until fall of '07 maybe? Information with no help or assistance is a waste of the money you are using and/or spending.”

“I will try to be a more active participant because I feel strongly in favor of the Conservation Connect program.”

“While I was glad to receive your info, I had attended another ‘fire’ seminar a few years ago and have completed several burns since.”

Twenty-one of the non-participants who returned surveys included written comments, many related to address corrections or contact information. Three respondents indicate they already have used or plan to use prescribed fire. One landowner simply stated that “I am against burning ground cover.”

A couple of landowners expressed concern about safety and working with adjoining landowners:

“We own 80 acres....67 are in timber. We are surrounded by timber. We need participation from adjoining landowners to participate in a burn. We are too small for control fire measures on our own.”

“I would be afraid of a controlled burn, because if they get out of hand, how would you stop it?”

“I do have a 2-3 acre pasture that I've been considering burning,” wrote a landowner. “It is close to my house and I don't want to burn the house down.”

Another writer said he is a steward of his own land and knows what needs to be done, while another landowner believes his land is in “good shape and well taken care of.”

One Loess Hills absentee landowner shared his interest in conservation and current conservation practices: “My cousin is a conservation officer in Sidney so I am up on current information. Also, I grew up living in the Hills so I know about burning and other aspects. I appreciate your checking. I try to do any practice that will protect the hills and help wildlife.”