



The Westbrook Artists' Site is on property owned by the Lair family at 2325 Holliswell Bridge Road. The burn field has been in CRP for the past 14 years and has not been part of a burn program. There is currently a mix of native and exotic plants.

Field day in Madison County

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It should be remembered that at first there was but very little or no brush—it was either timber or prairie—because the great, sweeping prairie fires kept down all kinds of undergrowth.

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The Sac and Fox tribes, as well as the settlers who came after them, were all active in executing controlled burns. This practice could be called a "lost art" and one we have identified as being a cost effective way to promote not only ecology and improved water conservation, but in supporting our common interests and community diversity. A field day and demonstration prescribed (also referred to as controlled) burn was held on Oct. 11 and sponsored by an IFBF SHARE Grant. The event was co-sponsored by the Southern Iowa Oak Alliance (SIOA) and was at the Westbrook Artists' Site (WAS) located next to the Holliswell Covered

Bridge.

The president of the Southern Iowa Oak Alliance, Casey Campbell, arrived pre-dawn to help prepare for the event. Madison County Farm Bureau President John LaFratte and other members including Wes Tish attended the demonstration day along with a diverse group of people from "For Land Sakes!" (formerly Madison County Landowners Group), Iowa State University, UMass Boston, Bryant University, Indiana University, Fluxx Gallery, and other organizations.

Gregg Pattison, from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Travis Strable, from Madison County, led the discussion and demonstration of what is involved in executing a prescribed burn. The field day included an exhibition of work addressing the history of the land and issues related to aspects of land stewardship and management. In particular, aerial images of the site from the 1930s through 2013 revealed the transfor-

mation of a considerable part of the property from oak savanna (defined by relatively few trees and a mix of grassland and prairie) to a nearly completely closed tree canopy. This change in the landscape greatly alters habitat that provides for native flora and fauna. The burns are the only suitable method to rehabilitate the landscape to support our native species that once flourished here.

Our field day started with a heavy layer of frost and high humidity at the burn site. These conditions required some patience for the day to raise the temperature, lower the humidity and create dry enough conditions for the burn to begin. The wind was a bit light to support the burn but sufficient and coming from the east and northeast so that smoke would not be a concern for surrounding neighbors and the Holliswell Bridge. The burn boss, Travis Strable, recently mowed new fire breaks and decided we could start the burn from the area near the "Field Chapel" (2010), a small struc-

ture in the burn field that would be preserved. The firebreak would be enhanced by burning around the structure. Despite the dry grasses and good conditions the fire was not adequately progressing and upon further investigation a fine layer of mud from fall flooding of the Middle River was acting as an effective fire retardant. The burn goals would not be met until a cleansing rain would remove the coating.

Ironically, the burn process provides for a plant and soil system that has greatly increased capacity for absorbing water, mitigating run-off and soil erosion and had this practice already been more widely adopted, the burn might have been executed as scheduled. In other words, we need to burn in order to burn. Therefore, while we did not enjoy the benefit of a full burn, the field day provided a great experience for those that attended and reinforced the opportunity and need for promoting this practice in our community.