

Rocky Flats

NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

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Buffer Zone Prescribed Burn Postponed Early Spring pre-empts plans

GOLDEN, Colo., April 11, 2000 – Department of Energy (DOE) officials announced today that they are calling off plans to continue a prescribed burn in the Rocky Flats buffer zone for the Spring season. Site officials said that the warm and wet weather have led to an early and rapid “greening” of the Site’s 6000-acre buffer zone, creating conditions unsuitable for a prescribed burn.

Prescribed burning is aimed at managing vegetation in the site’s predominantly uncontaminated buffer zone, reducing the likelihood of a wildfire, and maintaining the ecological value of the tall grass prairie at the Site. The burn, proposed for 500 acres, was to be conducted by the U.S. Forest Service.

“We have said all along that we would only do this if it made sense ecologically,” said Acting DOE Manager Paul Golan. “We knew we had a short window of opportunity for prescribed burning this season. After consulting with the U.S. Forest Service and with our own ecologists, we have concluded that the window has closed on us.”

DOE Deputy Assistant Manager John Rampe explained that the early spring greening reduced the effectiveness of the prescribed burn. “With too much green material, we cannot get an effective fire, and we cannot generate enough heat to burn off the thatch, which is the main point of the burn.” Rampe explained. “It also means much more smoke. Overall, the best season for burning has ended.” Rampe also cited the seasonal nesting patterns of migratory birds as a reason for delaying the burn. “The birds are returning to build their nests,” Rampe said. “A prescribed burn now would disrupt their nesting.”

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DOE will begin planning now for another prescribed burn during the next favorable season, possibly this Fall 2000 or the Spring of 2001. "Prescribed burning remains a key element to managing the natural assets of the buffer zone," Rampe said. "Rocky Flats contains thousands of acres of some of the last remaining xeric tall grass prairie in the Front Range. DOE has an active responsibility for managing and preserving it. We also need to take steps to reduce the possibility of a prairie fire. Prescribed burning will remain one of our options for prairie management as we go forward."

Many environmental groups and local governments have expressed their support; however, others have raised questions and concerns about the prescribed burn. "While we are convinced that this burn is both safe and necessary, this delay gives us additional time to work with our communities to address some of these issues." Golan said.

This announcement follows a successful test burn April 6, covering fifty acres of the Site. DOE conducted the test burn in response to requests from several local governments and others for a small-scale burn prior to the permitted 500-acre burn. DOE took air samples at the burn and is making them available today to the community. The sampled data on the following pages, show no measurable levels of radionuclides above what would be associated with burning a similar uncontaminated area. These results are being analyzed further and this analysis will be shared with the public.

"The test burn was very useful," Rampe said. "It gave us and the public a lot more information, and it's allowing us to do important research on the impact of vegetation loss on soil re-suspension in the air. What we learn from the test burn will be useful to us in conducting the cleanup of the Site."

The Rocky Flats Environmental Technology Site is a DOE-owned Superfund cleanup site and former nuclear weapons production facility that is on track for an accelerated cleanup and closure.

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