Prescribed fire
A tool to mimic nature

**What is prescribed fire?**
Prescribed fire is the use of carefully planned fire purposefully set under stringent conditions to control the fire's effects. Public and private land managers use prescribed fire as a tool to mimic nature.

**Florida’s fire history**
Historically, fires ignited by lightning swept uncontrolled across Florida. The fires often burned for days or weeks, and covered many miles before going out. This scene once repeated itself many times each spring and summer in Florida. The plants and animals of the pine woods are accustomed to these frequent fires and depend on fire for their very survival. But because of highways, homes and businesses, and public safety, such wildfires can no longer be allowed to roam freely.

**Benefits of prescribed fire**
The St. Johns River Water Management District uses prescribed fire to reduce the possibility of wildfire while enhancing land’s biological values.

Prescribed fire has many benefits in nature:
- Restoring and maintaining natural communities
- Reducing chances of destructive wildfires
- Perpetuating fire-adapted plants and animals
- Cycling nutrients
- Controlling tree diseases
- Opening scenic vistas

Fire is a natural process in many plant communities — sandhills, pine flatwoods, scrub and marsh, to name a few. Without fire, these communities change, the plants and animals unique to the original habitat maintained by fire are lost. Fox squirrels, gopher tortoises, scrub jays, red-cockaded woodpeckers, wiregrass and longleaf pines are just a few of the many species which depend on fire.

The use of prescribed fire (or controlled burning) is necessary for Florida to maintain the variety of plant communities and their associated animal life, to approximate natural conditions and to reduce the chances of damaging wildfire.

During prescribed fires, wildlife burrow underground or move to other areas as the fire passes, and return later to the area.

Unlike prescribed fire, wildfires are very destructive. For example, in the summer of 1998, more than 450,000 acres of land burned throughout Florida. Of that total, 10 percent of the fires were on public lands owned by the District. That summer, 83 percent of the District’s Buck Lake Conservation Area — where many of the endangered scrub jay live — was burned. Though scrub jay require periodic fire to maintain their habitat, they cannot tolerate having all of their habitat burned at the same time because much of their habitat was previously lost to development.

**FAST FACT**
Fire is a natural process in many of Florida’s plant communities and is necessary to maintain the variety of the state’s plants and animals.

Steve Miller, director of the District’s Division of Land Management, sets a prescribed fire on District land.

The gopher tortoise benefits from prescribed fire.
Limiting prescribed fires
Human fear of fire led many land managers to attempt to control fire by suppressing lightning-caused fire as quickly as possible. This, as well as the development and fragmenting of the state’s natural areas, has drastically reduced the role of lightning fires in maintaining the diversity of habitats so necessary for our animal life. Periodic prescribed fires are the only means we have to meet the needs of many plants and animals while also reducing the threat of property damage from wildfires.

Periodic fires protect neighboring private property from destructive wildfires, but not without some temporary inconveniences. Smoke and ash travel with the wind and can occasionally find their way to residential areas. Great care is taken to minimize this temporary inconvenience.

District staff and other agencies’ staff participate in ongoing training to use prescribed fire and to learn about the latest techniques for fighting wildfires.

Other facts about prescribed fire
- In 1990, the Florida Legislature passed the Prescribed Fire Act to demonstrate the importance of prescribed fire and to provide liability protection.
- In 1997, Florida’s governor and Cabinet designated the second week of March as Prescribed Fire Awareness Week.
- Since 1995, all 33 county commissions in north Florida have passed resolutions supporting the use of prescribed fire.

Prescribed fires are carefully monitored by land managers.

It’s not long after a prescribed fire that nature begins the regrowth process.

District land managers use a variety of ways to get into areas where prescribed fire is to be used, including on horseback.