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Controlled burns planned for Shawangunk Ridge



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Plans for prescribed burns on the Shawangunk Ridge were announced by representatives of the Shawangunk Ridge Biodiversity Partnership. The Partnership is a science-based, public/private consortium of agencies dedicated to the long-term protection of the Shawangunks.

To occur between now and April 23, controlled burns are planned for up to nine open fields at Spring Farm (in the Town of Marbletown) and Glory Hill (in New Paltz) on the Mohonk Preserve, totaling 56 acres. Prescribed fires are set safely and intentionally under predetermined conditions to achieve specific land management objectives, and would not be set unless all of the required conditions are met. Prescribed fires are only conducted by experienced crews with specific fire management and prescribed burn training.

"Last year, the Shawangunk Ridge Biodiversity Partnership successfully demonstrated that prescribed fire could be used safely and effectively, and our demonstration burn plots covered about 35 acres. This year, we will continue to work together to use controlled fire to manage and restore the natural ecosystems of the Shawangunks," said Cara Lee, Director of The Nature Conservancy's Shawangunk Ridge Program. "Restoring fire as a natural process to the Ridge is based on our scientific understanding of how fire plays a role in keeping forests healthy."

"Our burn plans define when it is safe to conduct a prescribed fire, and we work closely with meteorologists and other scientists to monitor weather and environmental conditions to determine when conditions are right for a burn to take place," said Glenn Hoagland, Executive Director of the Mohonk Preserve. "Strict, predetermined conditions must be met to safely and effectively conduct

these burns, which will help increase biodiversity and reduce the risk of unplanned wildfires on the ridge."

Prescribed fire has been used nationwide as a land management tool for more than 40 years to achieve specific land management objectives. According to the National Interagency Fire Center, federal agencies have ignited nearly 80,000 prescribed fires over the past seven years, burning over 14 million acres of land. A member of the Partnership, The Nature Conservancy is a national leader in fire management, burning over 100,000 acres annually.

The prescribed burn team for the Gunks will draw on the fire management expertise of Nature Conservancy staff from throughout the Northeast and from the Albany Pine Bush Preserve Commission. Also participating will be qualified Mohonk Preserve rangers, staff from Minnewaska State Park Preserve, Sam's Point Preserve, and trained volunteer firefighters, with NYS DEC rangers stationed on hand as back-up.

Fire is necessary to maintain the globally rare pitch pine barrens and associated forest types that are representative of the Shawangunks. Many of the vegetational communities of the Shawangunks have developed adaptations that allow them to survive, or even depend on periodic fires. Of 186 rare (federally listed) plant species, 25% require fire to be sustained while only 2% are harmed by fire. Extensive research from across the Northeast shows that fire helps recycle nutrients and can reduce invasive species. Fire benefits biodiversity by maintaining habitat for a broad range of common, rare and endangered species. Additionally, prescribed burns reduce the probability of wildfires by decreasing the accumulation of overgrown vegetation, dead wood and other wildland fuel that builds up over time.