

# Drought increases chance of wildfires

By **Toni M. Flax**

*Rangeland Management Specialist  
Natural Resources Conservation Service*

HILL CITY – One of the inherent issues of drought conditions is that it also increases our chances for wildfires. Whether it is a lightning strike, someone throwing out a cigarette, or driving a vehicle across the dry grass, a person's worst nightmare can quickly become reality.

This leaves the question, "What now?"

Timing is everything. If the wildfire happens in the late spring, more than likely the grass will suffer few ill effects. The ground will warm up quickly, and the grasses will start growing, covering the ground and not allowing long periods of bare, blowing soil.

The wildfires during drought that are of the most concern are the ones that happen during the late summer, fall and winter months. Not only does this allow for the soil to blow, it weakens the plants themselves.

By the end of July, 85 percent of the growing season has occurred in the mixed-grass prairie of Kansas. Thus, a fire that happens after the first of August leaves only 15 percent of the growing season for the plant to produce new leaves, go to the reproductive state, build roots and store reserves for the winter so it can start growing next spring.

In a drought, those processes are already slowed and the plant is hurting. A fire will further weaken the plant, because it will have to go through that whole growing process with little time for it to build up a root reserve.

Thus, the plant will be weak the next spring when it comes out of dormancy.

So the question then becomes, "What do I do next year for grass to graze?" The big concern is that cattle will graze the burned area harder and tend to camp out on those sites following a burn, overgrazing them, and undergraze other parts of the pasture.

To come up with an answer, the producer needs to consider the size of the field and how much was burned and then think

about the following options:

Option 1 – Fence out the burned area and graze it separately.

Option 2 – Burn off the rest of the field with a prescribed burn when the conditions are right.

Option 3 – Rest the pasture a year – but a producer may still find differences in the forage remaining after a year of rest, differences that grazing livestock could exploit.

The most important thing to keep in mind is that the area has changed and management of that area will have to change as well. There is no cookie-cutter answer because everyone's place and management are different.

However, if you find yourself in this predicament, and you have questions or would like help formulating a range management plan that will work for your situation, contact your local Natural Resources Conservation Service office or conservation district office located at your local county USDA Service Center (listed in the telephone book under United States Government or on the internet at [offices.usda.gov](http://offices.usda.gov)).

## Stabilization structures keep soil from gully erosion

By **Bradley J. Younker**

*Agricultural Engineer  
Natural Resources Conservation Service*

LaCROSSE – Do you have large gullies running through your field? Are you losing more and more of your rangeland or cropland to large headcuts working back up into your field? Have you wondered how you can solve these growing problems?

Grade stabilization structures are used to protect the soil from gully erosion or scouring. These structures can be a drop spillway, a small dam and basin with a pipe outlet or a lined waterway protected by rock or turf reinforcement mat.

Grade stabilization structures can be used in all different types of situations. They can be used to take out a two-foot drop or a 15-foot drop in the channel. Grade stabilization structures decrease the erosive water flow to where the existing channel is stable again. Headcuts can occur anywhere but are prevalent along

creek and river banks where the channel is deeply incised. Drainage areas for the structures can also vary greatly from 20 acres to 1,000 plus acres.

Typically the most inexpensive cost alternative is to use a lined waterway covered with permanent Turf Reinforcement Mat. This mat is composed of permanent high strength polypropylene matting and on average, they are installed at a third of the cost of rock or concrete chutes.

The lined waterway or chute is shaped and seeded prior to the installation of the mat. The seed mix used is typically the same that is used in other waterway installations. Once grass is established, the mat can handle water flow velocities of 25 feet per second.

For information on grade stabilization structures and turf reinforcement mat, contact your local Natural Resources Conservation Service office or conservation district office located at your local county U.S. Department of Agriculture Service Center.

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