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Prescribed Fire Promotes Revitalization for Wetlands

(Conyers, GA – November 22, 2021) Big Haynes Nature Center (BHCNC), a community wetlands and recreational site, located at the Georgia International Horse Park, has partnered with the Georgia Forestry Commission (GFC) and Georgia Prescribed Fire Council to complete its very first controlled burn that will prove to have long-lasting ecological benefits for the conservation site. Earlier this year, Bald Rock Meadows (situated on the northern side of the BHCNC), was successfully burned, but the wetlands area could not be included due to the ground being too moist, a frequent challenge of a very wet environment. The 26-acre prescribed fire is scheduled the week of November 29th, depending on weather conditions. Completion of this project is a critical step of a 10-year Forest Stewardship Plan, and both areas will continue this practice on a two to three year rotation.

How did this project get its roots?

In 2019 to 2020, Mincy Moffett, a former restoration botanist with GA DNR, helped lay the groundwork for the upcoming burn. While working with BHCNC staff to identify key plant life in the wetlands ecosystem, he noted, "The Big Haynes Creek Nature Center contains high-quality wetlands surrounded by a recovering oak/pine/hickory forest. It provides a wonderful opportunity for education, recreation, and inspiration. However, the presence of invasive plant species threatens to degrade this valuable resource and must be addressed." To avert any further destruction, he suggested that the Center work with the Georgia

Forestry Commission to ignite a strategy, and a prescribed fire was prioritized.

Why Prescribe to Controlled Burns?

“Prescribed fires are a management tool in natural areas and state parks to improve habitat for wildlife by restoring woodlands and wetlands,” explains Georgia Forestry Commission (GFC) Wildfire Specialist, Marcus Beasley, who will lead the burn operations. “This practice will decrease the accumulation of litter, and increase the biomass and stem densities of some wetland plants generally considered less desirable for wildlife.” Beasley further explains, “A controlled burn will reduce the amount of fallen branches, understory growth and dead trees that accumulate naturally and from storm events. By decreasing the amount of available fuels, prescribed fires reduce the chance for a potentially destructive wildfire to occur.”

In addition to the fuel reduction benefits, removing dead vegetation through fire also reinvigorates vegetation for wildlife. Burns increase the amount of open water, providing increased and more navigable areas for waterfowl and aquatic animals to feed and rear their young. Historically, native species that live in wetland areas have adapted to periodic fire, and now, even depend on it. As Big Haynes Creek Nature Center is home to literally hundreds of native and migratory wildlife, upkeep of the wetlands’ natural habitat is critical.

Jennifer Bexley, Director of the Georgia International Horse Park, says, “Our primary goals are to slow the spread of invasive Chinese privet, open areas for new growth and enhance the wetlands and wildlife habitat. The burn will also improve access and aesthetics of the trail system, which are important to all our visitors.” She adds, “We’re very pleased to have the expertise and input of our partners to launch our

long-term plan, which will allow this very special community greenspace to thrive.”

Preparation Underway

GFC personnel, all of whom have undergone immense training and met national wildland firefighting certification standards, will conduct the upcoming prescribed fire. GFC staff have already begun clearing vegetation and creating natural firebreaks on parts of the Blue Trail and throughout the Purple Trail, the heart of the wetlands. Several structures including a wildlife observation boardwalk, canoe launch, pavilion, and interpretative signage will also be protected a day or two prior to the burn. A key factor in their preparation is that they are doing this with very little to no carbon footprint.

Prior to any controlled burn, wind speeds and direction, air temperature, relative humidity, and fuel moisture levels are considered. Bexley cites, “Their expertise will allow them to manage the burn safely, and to prevent fire from escaping into adjacent properties and to minimize the effect of smoke in nearby residential areas.”

For general safety, BHCNC will be closed to the general public from early morning to sunset on the day of the burn, and the Rockdale Fire Rescue team will also be on-site.

Burns Across the Border

Georgia is 1 of 3 states that burn over 1 million acres annually, making the State a national leader in this practice, but few take place so close to the Atlanta border, which could help set a precedent for the future of prescribed burns. Mike Davis, Forest Fire Management Officer with the U.S. Forest Service, and Chair of the Georgia Prescribed Fire Council, says he is “optimistic that more awareness will encourage stakeholders and local communities to effectively partner to use fire to benefit natural habitats in urban areas.”

“It’s a privilege to be leading the execution of this prescribed burn with so many important partners,” said Georgia Forestry Chief, Frank Sorrells. “The use of fire as a forest management tool that helps promote wildlife is a message we’re eager to share with local citizens. We don’t see many prescribed fires so close to the Atlanta border, and Big Haynes Creek Nature Center is taking a commendable step to demonstrate the value of prescribed fire.”

For more information about the status of the prescribed burn at Big Haynes Creek Nature Center, visit the City of Conyers website, <https://www.conyersga.com>, the City, GIHP and Big Haynes Creek Nature Center’s social media feeds, or contact Jennifer Edwards at Jennifer.edwards@conyersga.gov.

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