



Devens RFTA uses fire for conservation

By K. Houston Waters, Devens RFTA Public Affairs - November 18, 2019



Wildland firefighters with the U.S. Forest Service participate in the prescribed burn at Devens Reserve Forces Training Area (Devens RFTA) Nov. 4, 2019. The Forest Service crew worked in cooperation with Devens RFTA, Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, the Bureau of Air & Waste, Central Region (MassDep), the Mass. Department of Conservation and Recreation's Bureau of Forest Fire Control (DCR), to burn 189 acres of Turner Drop Zone for land and resource management, conservation, and training. (Photo Credit: Devens RFTA) [VIEW ORIGINAL](#)

Devens, Mass. -- When most of us consider the impact of wildfire, we usually think about destruction and chaos. What we usually do not consider are the many benefits of fire. If the power of fire is effectively controlled, natural environments, organizations, and communities can benefit, especially in

the areas of resource management, conservation, and increased inter-operability of safety and fire personnel. Beginning in early November, Devens Reserve Forces Training Area (Devens RFTA) put this method to practice by utilizing a process known as "prescribed burning" on one of their training ranges.

"Prescribed burning is an important tool for natural resource conservation, training, land management, and wildfire prevention and minimization," said Suzy Richardson, a natural resource specialist in the environmental division of the Department of Public Works at Devens RFTA. "Fire is a natural part of grassland and forest ecology and necessary for the maintenance and restoration of many of the habitats and species found here."

Devens RFTA worked in coordination with the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, the Bureau of Air & Waste, Central Region (MassDep), the U.S. Forest Service, the Mass. Department of Conservation and Recreation's Bureau of Forest Fire Control (DCR), and the Devens Fire Department, to conduct the burn, which took place Nov. 4-5 on 189 acres of Turner Drop Zone, an airdrop training range on the installation's South Post.

The Mass. Division of Fisheries & Wildlife (DFW) recommended the burn to enhance the growth of warm-season grasslands in the area and to improve the habitat for a number of native species of endangered and threatened birds protected under the Mass. Endangered Species Act (MESA).

An example of one of these species is the grasshopper sparrow, or Ammodramus savannarum. According to DFW's Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program, open fields with limited shrubbery and ground litter are necessary to support the species. By removing this through fire, land managers hope to create a better habitat for the sparrow, which could improve their population.

In addition to the conservation objective, the burn provided fire and safety crews with an opportunity to gain real world, hands-on experience in a live-fire scenario.

"The prescribed burn provided a valuable live training experience for the range control staff that are responsible for putting out fires caused by range use," said Richardson. "They were able to participate in the prescribed burn in both holding and firing positions and gained valuable experience working with other wildland firefighting professionals."

The burn was also an opportunity to bring a number of independent agencies, like the Army, Forest Service, the local fire department, and the DCR, together for one specific purpose. "In the event of a severe a wildfire on Fort Devens, these agencies would need to work together to protect lives and property," said Richardson. "This prescribed burn provided all agencies involved with the valuable experience of working together."

Safety and fire crews took steps to notify the public and ensure safety during the burn. Crews were on site at all times managing and controlling the fire.

The burn also provided land managers with insight into how invasive species, such as the spotted knapweed and autumn olive, respond to fire. This useful information will contribute to ongoing efforts to control those species.

Tuner Drop Zone is just one of 20 sites in Massachusetts inhabited by the grasshopper sparrow.

Devens RFTA is the major Army Reserve presence in New England. Devens RFTA provides operational, training, and logistics resources to tenant, transient training, and stationed units and area customers.