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Source: Rangeland Ecology & Management, 61(2):169-181.

Published By: Society for Range Management

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2111/07-037.1>

URL: <http://www.bioone.org/doi/full/10.2111/07-037.1>

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Prescribed Fire, Soil, and Plants: Burn Effects and Interactions in the Central Great Basin

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Abstract

Pinyon and juniper expansion into sagebrush ecosystems results in decreased cover and biomass of perennial grasses and forbs. We examine the effectiveness of spring prescribed fire on restoration of sagebrush ecosystems by documenting burn effects on soil nutrients, herbaceous aboveground biomass, and tissue nutrient concentrations. This study was conducted in a central Nevada woodland and included control and burn treatment plots sampled before and after a prescribed fire. Six native understory plant species (*Crepis acuminata*, *Eriogonum umbellatum*, *Eriogonum elatum*, *Poa secunda secunda*, *Festuca idahoensis*, and *Lupinus argenteus*) important for native sagebrush obligate foragers were chosen to represent the understory plant community. *L. argenteus* is also important for system nutrient cycling and nitrogen fixation. Plants were collected from three microsites (under tree canopy, under shrub canopy, and interspace) common in transitional woodlands during peak growth the summer before a spring prescribed burn and each of two summers following the burn. Soils were collected from corresponding locations at two depth intervals (0–8 and 8–52 cm) to determine the relationships between soil and plant nutrients following fire. Microsite affected soil nutrients but did not influence plant tissue concentrations with the exception of *F. idahoensis*. Burning resulted in increases in soil surface NH_4^+ , NO_3^- , inorganic N, Ca^{2+} , Mn^{2+} , and Zn^{2+} . Increases in NO_3^- , inorganic N, and Zn^{2+} were also observed in deeper horizons. Burning did not affect aboveground plant biomass or nutrient concentrations in the first year with the exception of *F. idahoensis*, which had increased tissue P. By the second year, all species had statistically significant responses to burning. The most common response was for increased aboveground plant weight and tissue N concentrations. Plant response to burning appeared to be related to the burn treatment and the soil variables surface K^+ , NO_3^- , and inorganic N.

Resumen

La expansión de Pinyon y enebro en los ecosistemas de artemisa resultan en la disminución de cobertura y biomasa de gramíneas perennes y especies herbáceas. Hemos examinamos la efectividad del fuego prescrito en la primavera para la restauración de los ecosistemas de artemisa mediante la documentación de los efectos de la quema sobre los nutrientes del suelo, la biomasa herbácea aérea, y las concentraciones de nutrientes en el tejido. Este estudio fue realizado en un bosque central de Nevada. Se muestrearon parcelas tratadas y de control antes y después de los fuegos prescritos. Seis especies de plantas nativas (*Crepis acuminados*, *Eriogonum umbellatum*, *Eriogonum elatum*, *Poa secunda secunda*, *Festuca idahoensis*, y *Lupinus argenteus*), importantes para especies forrajeras obligadas, fueron escogidas para representar a la comunidad de plantas del sotobosque. *L. argenteus* es también una especie importante para el ciclo nutritivo del sistema y la fijación de nitrógeno. Las plantas se recolectaron de tres micrositios (bajo la cubierta arbórea, bajo el dosel arbustivo, y el espacio intermedio) comunes en bosques de transición durante el crecimiento máximo de verano antes de una quema prescrita de primavera y cada uno de los dos veranos después de la quema. Los suelos fueron recolectados de los mismos sitios con dos intervalos de profundidad (0–8 y 8–52 cm) para determinar las relaciones entre el suelo y los nutrientes de las plantas subsiguientes a la quema. El micrositio afectó los nutrientes del suelo, pero no influyó en las concentraciones en el tejido de la planta, con excepción de *F. idahoensis*. La quema resultó en un incremento de NH_4^+ , NO_3^- , N inorgánico, Ca^{2+} , Mn^{2+} , y Zn^{2+} en la superficies del suelo. Los aumentos de NO_3^- , N inorgánicos, y Zn^{2+} fueron también observados en los horizontes más profundos. La quema no afectó la biomasa de la planta sobre la superficie o las concentraciones de nutrientes en el primer año, con excepción de *F. idahoensis* que había aumentado el P en el tejido. Para el segundo año, todas las especies tenían respuestas estadísticamente significativas a la quema. La respuesta más común fue el aumento de peso aéreo de la planta y las concentraciones de N en el tejido. La respuesta de la planta a la quema parece estar relacionada al tratamiento de la quema y a las variables de la superficie en suelo de K^+ , NO_3^- , y N inorgánico.

Key Words: plant nutrition, prescribed fire, soil nutrients, woodland encroachment

INTRODUCTION

Much of the Great Basin is currently dominated by sagebrush ecosystems. At intermediate elevations, sagebrush ecosystems are increasingly influenced by encroachment of pinyon and juniper trees (Miller and Tausch 2001). Although pinyon-juniper woodlands have expanded and receded several times

Research was funded by the USDA Forest Service Rocky Mountain Research Station, Great Basin Ecosystem Management Project, and Joint Fire Sciences Program Project O1B-3-3-01.

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Manuscript received 20 April 2007; manuscript accepted 2 December 2007.

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