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If you live or work on Joint Base Lewis-McChord, chances are you have seen or smelled the smoke of prescribed burns.

The biologists and foresters of JBLM Directorate of Public Works Environmental Division use prescribed fire, also known as controlled burning, for several different reasons:

- maintains open landscapes which are ideal for many military training missions;
- aids in wildfire suppression by reducing fuel loads.
- benefits the process of ecological restoration for wildlife habitat, including habitat for several rare and endangered species.

It may seem counterintuitive to restore a piece of land by setting it on fire, but prescribed fire is an essential tool for maintaining approximately 18,000 acres of fire adapted ecosystems, including grass-dominated prairies, Oregon white oak woodlands and Ponderosa pine forests on JBLM.

These fire adapted ecosystems are divided into small fire management units which are burned following a specific plan, or prescription, typically every three to five years.

Frequent disturbance intervals help these ecosystems maintain their short-statured vegetation or what we perceive as openness and resiliency, maintaining early successional vegetation communities minimize competition from other vegetation types.

One example of a strong vegetational competitor is Scot's broom, the large, yellow-flowered weed. Scot's broom is ubiquitous along the roadsides of western Washington.

Unfortunately, the weed is not restricted to only the road edges. This invasive weed also grows rapidly on prairie soils, and research has shown that it can alter soil chemistry making it more favorable for itself, and other weeds, to persist there.

Scot's broom ruins habitat for prairie dwelling animals by crowding out the native wildflowers and grasses that animals need for food, water and shelter.

This loss of habitat causes populations to dwindle and prompts biologists and others to take action to prevent further declines and ultimately extinction of the species.

In lieu of herbicides, biologists use prescribed burns to kill invasive weeds such as Scot's broom. The blackened, barren landscapes immediately after a prescribed burn in the summer starkly contrast the colorful array of springtime flowers.

Many prairie plants such as common camas require full sun, and don't do well in competition with neighboring or overtopping plants. Many species have special adaptations such as sturdy bulbs, deep taproots or underground rhizomes which help them tolerate the summer droughts.

These adaptations can also help the plant persist in a nonflowering state until conditions are appropriate, adding to the resiliency of the ecosystem.

Prescribed fire is a powerful tool that can help restore the structure and function of the ecosystem while simultaneously supporting the military mission and the sustainability of Joint Base Lewis-McChord.

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