

## Burn moratorium lifted at 5 forest preserve sites

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Oct. 4--Ten years after a moratorium was imposed, Cook County Board President Bobbie Steele on Tuesday lifted the remaining bans on controlled burns at five forest preserve sites in the Sauganash and Edgebrook communities.

A countywide moratorium was enacted in 1996 because of opposition by nearby homeowners and others to the forest preserve district's management-land practices, particularly controlled burns. But the ban was lifted in 1997 on all but the five sites after the district adopted new policies.

"It was the right thing to do," said Steele, who received a standing ovation from the board and audience members after announcing her executive order lifting the moratorium. In "doing my research with regard to the importance of managing our land better, it was not a hard decision. It was something that needed to be done."

Steele's actions followed the recommendation of an advisory group, which concluded that "prudent use of the management practice of controlled burns is essential to re-establishing full health to the natural areas."

Bruce Boyd, executive director of the Nature Conservancy in Illinois, said controlled burns are important to help maintain woodlands and prairies. They are filled with plant species that are tolerant to fire, which for thousands of years was part of the environment prior to modern development.

Without periodic burning, aggressive non-native species such as buckthorn will invade and crowd out native plants, reducing the diversity of the ecosystem, Boyd said.

"If we want to maintain our native biodiversity, we have an obligation to maintain these lands," Boyd said.

Benjamin Cox, executive director of Friends of the Forest Preserves, said the areas along the North Branch of the Chicago River where the moratorium was in place are suffering with too much non-native brush and a reduction in plant diversity.

"The whole idea here is to help the ecosystem be healthy and in balance, and fire is just one of the tools that we use to accomplish that," Cox said. "It's what naturally occurred there before."

General Supt. Steven Bylina said that before burning begins again, the district must educate the community about the lifting of the moratorium. He said "exceptional notification" would be given to people in the surrounding areas.

Bylina said the sites have suffered from the moratorium.

"Those areas of concern have been allowed to pretty much be overgrown with invasive species and have been in a state of neglect," Bylina said. "Now, across all of our holdings we are able to utilize what management practices were in fact being done elsewhere."