

The area of Prairie Pines Preserve east of the “berm/old railroad” and west of Lost Lane will be closed Monday through Friday for several weeks starting **Monday November 9th**. The area of the preserve accessed through the entrance off of U.S. 41 will remain open daily for dog walking and all other permitted activities. The access across the berm will be blocked, and all access gates will be posted with signage prohibiting entry Monday through Friday.

We have contracted Cooper Timber to complete melaleuca removal and pine tree thinning projects. Due to the **great potential** for equipment spooking horses, trees being dropped in areas where hikers may travel, and the risk of run-ins with trucks and cutting equipment using existing trails, the portion of the preserve east of the ditch crossing will be closed Monday through Friday. At this time we plan to allow public to enter on Saturday and Sunday. Crews will not be permitted to work weekends so that the public can hike or horseback ride. Due to the work, trails may not be as easy to follow due to openings created as melaleuca is removed and equipment uses trails for transport. Some portions of trails may be closed on weekends due to hazards, but staff will do their best to leave as many miles of trail open each weekend as possible.

One of the greatest challenges Conservation 20/20 staff faces is ensuring a safe balance between public use of the lands and stewardship activities that benefit wildlife and the overall health of the preserve. By logging out mass quantities of melaleuca, we are reducing the potential for catastrophic wildfires which could impact residences bordering the preserve as well as the wildlife. Add benefits include decreasing the melaleuca seed source and making access for treatment of invasive exotics easier for staff. Sunlight is blocked from reaching the ground in the dense melaleuca stands. Once sunlight can reach the ground again, wildflowers, grasses and eventually native trees will grow in the to increase the benefit to wildlife, and enhance the visual beauty of the preserve for all to enjoy.

Why thin the pines? Since some areas of the preserve have dense stands of pine with limited regeneration, we need to open up areas for new pines to seed in and begin the next generation of pines. Too many pines together in a wildfire situation can result in death or severe stress to the pines which can attract pine beetles. As a stewardship tool, pine tree thinning is one of the best methods we have to prepare areas for prescribed burning in a responsible way to decrease likelihood of pine tree mortality. Buffers of pines will be left along trails on the majority of the trail system.

Lets be honest- the initial work of removing the trees is going to look ugly. But, in a year grasses and other vegetation will reclaim the opened areas and as weather conditions allow, we will run prescribed fires through several management units to return nutrients to the soil and further break down slash left from the cutting.

Will the melaleuca come back? Short term the answer is yes. We will be using the small amount of money generated from the timber sale to treat some stumps of melaleuca, and grant funding will be applied for. When the melaleuca regrows, it will be shorter and easier for staff and contractors to treat, requiring less herbicide to be applied. Since there

are large melaleuca trees outside of our preserve boundary, we will always have a wind born seed source for new melaleuca to begin growing, and seeds can be distributed due to sheetflow of water across the preserve. If we were to not have this free melaleuca removal project, we would be looking at close to a million dollars needed to treat the melaleuca. It would be killed in place with ugly dead trees standing for years, slowly dropping their branches and causing hazards along the trails for years to come.

Bottom line? Please bear with us while we conduct this large scale stewardship activity. We are all aware that Prairie Pines has been much drier than normal this rainy season, and wildfire is on our mind. We are doing our best to be responsible land managers while allowing public usage. As work is completed in areas, we will evaluate re-opening portions of the preserve as the project continues and will keep the website and on-site kiosks updated with information.