Fire and rein: Controlled burns regenerate wildlife habitats

By Dan Vecchioni

Sometimes, you can fool Mother Nature.

That's the thinking behind the controlled burns that took place this spring on the grounds of our Monroe and River Rouge power plants in Southeastern Michigan.

The burns replicate the natural fires, often caused by lightning in years past, that helped regenerate the prairie ecosystems of the Midwest. The fires burn off the dead grass and woody and non-native plants, open the soil to more sunlight, and help the seeds of the native plants to germinate.

Jason Cousino, maintenance journeyman, River Rouge Power Plant, uses a drip torch while conducting a controlled burn at the plant March 27. Photo by Dave Mitchell.

"This is a good way to manage a prairie," said **Craig Tylenda**, supervisor, Environmental Science and Engineering, who oversaw the controlled burn at Monroe. "Without a fire, we eventually would have a forest."

The controlled burns are a means of maintaining the Monroe and River Rouge prairies as certified wildlife habitats.

"They are home to rabbits, groundhogs and deer, and are an excellent stop for migratory birds," Tylenda said. "They also are home to 'pollinators,' including butterflies, bees and other insects.

"In fact, spring works well for the controlled burns, not only because it's before the plants start greening up, but also because we don't harm the insects, which aren't out yet."

Every effort is made to ensure the burns are controlled.

"We need to have just the right amount of wind before we'd even attempt a burn," said **Jason Cousino**, union field safety specialist for Local 223, Utility Workers Union of America, and maintenance journeyman, who managed the burn at the River Rouge plant.

"We make sure the plant water wagon is available and put the local fire department on alert," Cousino said. "We then remove anything flammable from the area, and even shoo the wildlife away."

The person managing the fire will use a drip torch, while walking downwind in a straight line so the fire has to burn into the wind, slowly and not out of control. Also helping to keep the fire under control are natural and manmade barriers, like roads, lakes and other wet spots.

"The burns usually are not that dramatic," Tylenda said.

This spring, the controlled burns were completed on four acres of prairie at Monroe and one acre at River Rouge.

Waymon White, fuel supply operator, Monroe Power Plant, directs the fire at non-native plants while conducting a controlled burn at the plant March 20. Photo by Mark Houston.