3-29-2005

Big Sky students conduct fire experiments

University of Montana--Missoula. Office of University Relations

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UNIVERSITY RELATIONS • MISSOULA, MT 59812 • 406-243-2522 • FAX: 406-243-4520

NEWS RELEASE

March 29, 2005

Contact: Alison Perkins, (406) 243-6016, alison.perkins@mso.umt.edu; Jenny Wolfe, (406) 829-0379, jenniferwoolf@hotmail.com; Andrew Whiteley, (406) 243-6249, andrew.whiteley@mso.umt.edu.

BIG SKY STUDENTS CONDUCT FIRE EXPERIMENTS

MISSOULA —

Big Sky High School students have partnered with The University of Montana to investigate some burning questions about wildfires.

For instance, is fire harmful to nature? Can plants and insects survive a burn? Does the survival of plants or animals depend on the heat of a fire? How well do native plants regrow in areas after a burn? Can fire be good?

The students, their teachers and UM researchers have prepared burn plots on public land managed by the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation adjacent to Big Sky High School, where they will conduct a variety of scientific experiments this spring.

Their efforts are all part of The Burning Question, one of five demonstration projects developed by UM's Ecologists, Educators and Schools (ECOS) program.

Funded by the National Science Foundation, ECOS is a partnership among UM's Division of Biological Sciences, the University's College of Forestry and Conservation, and the Missoula County Schools Curriculum Consortium. It's designed to connect UM graduate students, undergraduates and faculty members with area teachers and students so that no child is left indoors. The program is directed by Carol Brewer, a UM biology associate professor.

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During the past month, students have counted plants and insects at plots to determine diversity and abundance. In the days before the burn, they will create breaks to keep fires from spreading beyond the plots. They also will add dried grasses to some plots so they can study burns with different intensities.

After the burns students will reseed some areas with native plants. They then will return periodically throughout the spring and coming years to observe how plant and insect numbers differ depending on how much fuel was available to burn.

In addition, the Big Sky students will prepare posters on their research and write about the project for their school newspaper.

The students' prescribed burns will take place from late March to early April. Burns are tentatively set for March 31 and April 1, 4, 7 and 8. Burns will take place between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m., and will be staggered so that several classes can participate. Local firefighters have volunteered to help out. For up-to-date information on the burn schedule, call Jenny Wolfe at (406) 829-0379 or Andrew Whiteley at (406) 243-6749.

The ECOS-Partners Program pairs UM students with area K-12 teachers. Using schoolyards and nearby open spaces, ECOS teams develop science demonstration projects related to local ecology and conservation biology. The program is designed to contribute to a national model of how locally based ecological research can be introduced to improve the science teaching and learning in schools and university environments.

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