



PHOTOS BY KATHLEEN GALLIGAN/DETROIT FREE PRESS

Matt Demmon of the PlantWise company in Ann Arbor sets fire to woody shrubs and grasses in Rouge Park, on Detroit's west side on Wednesday. The burn was meant to stem invasive species, particularly an ornamental crabapple shrub, and make way for native ones.

BAD GRASS GOES, MAKING WAY FOR THE GOOD

Burns clear Rouge, Eliza Howell parks

By Megha Satyanarayana
Free Press Staff Writer

A couple of Detroit parks got minor face-lifts Wednesday, as fire burned off unwanted brush and grass.

Landscape and ecology experts torched Rouge Park and Eliza Howell Park on the city's west side, hoping to quell invasive plants and help seed normal grasses, flowers and brush that were choked out long ago.

Observing at Rouge Park were Southfield students, part of a homeschool 4H club.

"It's cool to see the actual thing happening," said Gabrielle Gordon, 14, as the flames took over a grassy area near West Outer Drive and Tireman. The students said they want to come back next week to help Detroit Public Schools students plant grass and flower seeds.

The Rouge River rises and



falls erratically. Native grasses and plants retain water.

"Prairie plants have a much better uptake of water, which means less water in the river," said ecologist Gary Crawford of ECT, an environmental consultancy group from Ann Arbor.

Crawford said the experts also are trying to stem the growth of an ornamental crabapple shrub that turned parts of the prairie land into a mini-forest.

"It's really overgrowing the

prairie," Crawford said. Many communities in southeast Michigan have regular controlled burns as a way to manage woody and grassy areas, but with tight budgets, park maintenance often falls to the wayside.

Wednesday's burns, which cost about \$7,500, were funded through a two-year \$648,000 grant the Alliance of Rouge Communities received from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, said Zachare Bell of ECT.

So, with a north wind blowing, landscape experts lit thin lines of a gasoline-kerosene mix and watched it go.

Matt Demmon of PlantWise, a landscape restoration company in Ann Arbor, trailed the fire as it hit wet edges.

"It pretty much puts itself out," he said.

Detroit fire officials looked on from the street.

"It's a beautiful thing when you don't have to put out a fire," said Lt. Quinton Levant.

"Had It With Dentures?"

