



The prescribed burn association model has successfully traveled from Nebraska to California—with a little help from the Fire Learning Network. © UCCE (Lenya Quinn-Davidson)

FOCUS ON LEARNING NETWORKS:

PRESCRIBED BURN ASSOCIATIONS: SHINING A NEW LIGHT ON PRIVATE LANDS BURNING IN THE WEST

Peer-to-peer learning through PERFECT spreads good ideas.

Across the United States, private lands burning is gaining interest and momentum. Some regions, like the Southeast, have had successful models for many years, with robust networks of private contractors, certified burners and experienced landowners who can plan and implement burns with little outside support. Other areas, including the West, have struggled to envision prescribed fire outside agency umbrellas, and the few private lands burns that occur in those places are often planned and led by fire suppression agencies. However, recent decades have seen the emergence of prescribed burn associations (PBAs), first in the Great Plains, and now—thanks to interstate inspirations and connections—in California.

A Brief History of PBAs

Prescribed burn associations are true community cooperatives, premised on valuing landowner training, empowerment and collaboration. Unlike government assistance programs or private contractor-led models, PBAs are naturally grassroots, and they represent year-round, local, low-cost prescribed fire capacity in the places where they are active. PBAs also promote a stewardship ethic that is inherently inclusive—because they rely on volunteers and all are welcome—and sustaining, because the projects are motivated by and in service to landowner and community needs.

In the Great Plains—a landscape dominated by private lands—PBAs were first inspired in the mid-1990s by the need to scale up burning to address landscape-level challenges, like the invasion of eastern red cedar into rangelands and prairies. Led by community members—including ranchers



In January 2020, prescribed burn association leaders from across California came together to connect and share with one another. Over two days, they were able to delve deeply into issues like liability, organizational structure, and statewide strategy. One outcome of that meeting was the development of a website to serve PBAs throughout the state, www.calpba.org. California PBA leaders continue to meet regularly for shared learning and collaboration.

What Is PERFECT?

Promoting Ecosystem Resilience and Fire Adapted Communities Together is a cooperative agreement between The Nature Conservancy, USDA Forest Service and agencies of the Department of the Interior that supports a portfolio of networks and strategies that bring people together to collectively identify and meet our wildfire challenges. These include the Fire Learning Network (FLN, since 2002), Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges (TRES, 2008), Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network (FAC Net, 2013) and Indigenous Peoples Burning Network (IPBN, 2016).

and farmers—PBAs in the Great Plains have been able to pool resources and equipment, leverage grants and other funding, and coalesce a volunteer workforce that is using prescribed fire at a truly meaningful scale. A 2015 survey led by John Weir at Oklahoma State University showed that in just an eight-year period, 27 PBAs in the Great Plains had implemented almost 1,100 burns for a total of more than 470,000 acres—mostly with little more than blue jeans, t-shirts, pick-up trucks and ATVs.

Connecting Through Our Networks

As co-leads of the TRES Coaches Network, Lenya Quinn-Davidson and Jeremy Bailey had worked on workforce and training issues for years, but they had never explicitly discussed models for private lands burning. However, 2016 had brought an outpouring of private landowner interest in prescribed fire in Humboldt County, California, where Lenya is located, and she and her local colleagues were looking for new inspiration and ideas. So Lenya called Jeremy to inquire about PBAs. The result—thanks to Jeremy’s vision and support—was a learning exchange with several PBA leaders from the Great Plains, all of whom had been affiliated with or supported by the Fire Learning Network (FLN) or Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges (TRES) over the years.

In August 2016, these leaders—including Emily Hohman from Iowa, and Ben Wheeler, Scott Stout and Mark and Deb Alberts from Nebraska—came to Humboldt County to share their stories, walk potential burn units, and better understand the issues facing their California counterparts. They were shocked by the curvy roads, the rugged terrain and the rigid air quality regulations, but the personal connections and parallels were strong, and the visitors left a major impression on the community. They also invited the California contingent to visit Nebraska, and in March 2017, Lenya and three Humboldt County partners spent five days burning with PBAs in central Nebraska.

The Ideas Take Root ...

They came home from that trip and decided there was absolutely no reason why the PBA model couldn’t work in the West, and in June 2017, they hosted their first PBA-style burn, staffed entirely by community members and volunteer fire departments. In March 2018, they officially formed the Humboldt County Prescribed Burn Association—the first PBA in the Pacific West. This PBA has now implemented 24 burns for a total of almost 1,200 acres—and has one of the largest memberships of any PBA in the country.



... and Flourish

Over the last year or so, the success of the Humboldt County PBA has catalyzed a movement in California, and community leaders across the state are spearheading PBA efforts on their own landscapes. By mid 2020, California had 15 PBA-style groups either active or in the process of formation. This momentum around prescribed fire on California’s private lands is daylighting important social and cultural norms in California’s fire culture, and it’s calling into question basic notions of who gets to use fire and how they should use it. California’s PBA leaders are paving a new, more inclusive and community-based model for prescribed fire implementation, and because of the urgency and gravity of California’s fire problems, CAL FIRE and other agencies have been generally supportive. In fact, the momentum around PBAs is giving everyone an extra nudge, and there is a new, shared excitement for prescribed fire across California’s private and public lands. In the past two years, it seems as if California’s prescribed fire stars have finally started to realign—and they point back to the shining success of the Great Plains.

For more about the Promoting Ecosystem Resilience and Fire Adapted Communities Together cooperative agreement between The Nature Conservancy, USDA Forest Service and agencies of the Department of the Interior, contact Marek Smith at marek_smith@tnc.org.

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