

Prescribed fire councils: a national survey

Lenya Quinn-Davidson,¹ Morgan Varner,² Mark Melvin,³ Jeremy Bailey⁴

In winter of 2012-2013, we conducted a survey of 24 prescribed fire councils throughout the United States. The goal of the survey was to better understand the history, organizational structure, and successes of prescribed fire councils, and to be able to share findings both within and beyond the council community. Below is a summary of key findings.

Organizational structure—who, what, why, how?

- Councils are mostly **volunteer organizations** that have no paid staff.
- Councils operate with **little or no funding**. Only 58% of councils report having an annual operating budget; the average budget of those councils is just over \$8000/year, and more than 25% of those funds are raised by councils through meeting registration fees and merchandise sales.
- Council **leadership is diverse**, and most council leadership includes a combination of federal and state agencies working in collaboration with NGOs, private landowners, and private business. Council leaders are mostly volunteers.
- Councils operate under a broad umbrella, including **diverse definitions of Rx fire**. They are generally open (non-membership) organizations that welcome broad participation.
- Councils share an overarching focus on restoration and ecological burning, and more than 50% of councils include managed wildfire in their definition of prescribed fire.

“I have not experienced a more effective collaboration than I have in my experience with the Council. Everyone from private landowner to federal agency all in the same room coming to a common set of goals and then effectively working on those goals is nothing short of amazing!”

“I can’t imagine our state without the Council.”

Survey respondents, 2013

What are councils doing?

- Council meetings focus on increasing networking and collaboration in the fire community, sharing management successes and challenges, and disseminating new research, among other things.
- A majority of councils have **worked on state and regional policy issues, provided training opportunities, and maintain active websites**.
- **More than 1770 people participate in in-person council activities every year** across the country, with each council averaging 88 people at in-person events per year. Some councils have small, focused trainings and events (with less than 20 people), whereas others have large (100-225 person) annual or biannual meetings.
- Councils share **education and outreach as a primary focus**, followed by **air quality/regulations, training/personnel issues, and liability**.

Larger picture: effectiveness of councils; successes and challenges

- A majority of councils feel that they have **increased the capacity of their region’s prescribed fire community**, and a majority feel that they may have **increased the quality of burning in their state or region**.
- A large majority (>75%) of councils have effectively:
 - helped identify and build community around prescribed fire in their state or region
 - increased public awareness of and support for Rx fire
 - increased communication between scientists and managers
 - developed or encouraged new partnerships and collaborations
- A majority of councils have effectively:
 - increased the number of acres treated with Rx fire in their region
 - inspired other state or regional councils
 - influenced state and local policies
- Councils struggle to maintain momentum, maintain strong leadership, move beyond annual meetings/events to tackle larger issues, and to operate without stable funding.

¹University of California Cooperative Extension, Northern California Prescribed Fire Council

²Mississippi State University, Northern California Prescribed Fire Council, Coalition of Prescribed Fire Councils

³Joseph W. Jones Ecological Research Center, Georgia Prescribed Fire Council, Coalition of Prescribed Fire Councils

⁴The Nature Conservancy, Northern California Prescribed Fire Council, Coalition of Prescribed Fire Councils