



POLICY BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTING PRESCRIBED FIRE

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We are conducting a three-year study with funding from the Joint Fire Science Program to understand policy barriers to applying prescribed fire on US Forest Service and BLM lands across the 11 western states. Our goals are to investigate current barriers and identify opportunities to increase implementation of prescribed fire. We conducted ~60 interviews with state environmental agencies, federal land management agencies, and other key partners. Below we report our key findings to date.

Key Findings to Date

The majority of interviewees reported that, while air quality regulation is a challenge, it is not the main barrier to implementing prescribed fire. Interviewees from most states said air quality regulations is not the primary factor limiting prescribed fire. All federal land managers said they face other barriers that currently limit opportunities, and in most cases said these were higher priorities to address than air quality. Barriers cited were a lack of resources, a need for more strategic planning, and limited internal incentives to burn. For the BLM, burning is limited by the presence of sage grouse and cheatgrass.

Communication among burners and with regulatory agencies is key to success. In some states, dedicated liaisons or working groups are in place to support communication among burners and with regulators; in other states, people are developing these structures or forming groups to identify challenges and opportunities. For instance, the Montana/Idaho Airshed Group tracks burn requests and meets biannually to resolve issues among burners and DEQs. There is a dedicated air quality liaison in the Forest Service for both New Mexico and Arizona. In California, a new MOU partnership is in place to problem solve. People said these arrangements are essential to getting more fire on the ground.

Limited capacity during burn windows to implement prescribed burns is a major barrier. People cited a general lack of capacity (i.e. lack of trained personnel) but also competition for capacity during wildfire season as a major barrier. Interviewees said about wildfires, “[Prescribed fire personnel] are the same people that are fighting those fires” leading to a “huge competition for resources.” Capacity also is limited when burn windows coincide with training and common times for annual leave.

Success relies on the passion and leadership of individual fire managers and line officers. Agency personnel said the incentives to do prescribed fire are minimal, while the challenges are many. Some noted that whether a unit has a strong prescribed fire program comes down to line officer leadership and the commitment of individual fire managers.

The majority of federal interviewees said they face challenges using agreements to share resources and increase capacity. Sharing resources and working across jurisdictions increases accomplishments and supports landscape burning. Interviewees said the Wyden Authority and various master agreements are helpful, but they still face many challenges in practice. More consistent guidance, knowledge, and efficiency in writing agreements would support increased burning, particularly across jurisdictions.



Reactions to wildland fire or escaped prescribed fire events can limit managers' ability to do prescribed fire. Interviewees said, media coverage and political attention related to fire events can cause politicians and agency leadership to restrict units' ability to apply fire, sometimes in distant locations and for many years. At the same time, strong partnerships with the media, public, and collaborative stakeholders can support the application of prescribed fire. Collaborators invested in fire application can help communicate the importance of fire to the rest of the community.

There is a diversity of approaches to air quality management and prescribed burn permitting across the Western states. For instance, Colorado requires obtaining a permit for each burn plan, while New Mexico utilizes a more flexible permit-by-rule system, which is essentially a registration process with which burners must comply. Strategies are often tailored to the complexity of air quality regulation and number of users in airsheds, but there may be opportunities to share successful strategies more effectively across states.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Regional and state-level partnerships are essential for supporting interagency communication and increasing capacity to get more fire on the ground. Interviewees said partnerships, smoke management liaisons or working groups, and strong lines of communication allow the involved parties to share knowledge, combine resources, and capitalize on opportunities to apply prescribed fire. Communication between land managers and state environmental agencies is essential to building an understanding of each agency's priorities and finding opportunities to increase the application of fire.

Interviewees emphasized the need for improved agency support of prescribed burning. This could include creating more incentives to burn, changing targets, hiring leaders with more fire experience, and increasing training opportunities. A Forest Service interviewee said, "Sharing that risk upward and having really solid support from the agency administrators up the chain—a level or two" would help land managers feel more comfortable about using prescribed fire as a management tool.

Opportunities exist to improve practice by improving strategic planning, identifying place-specific barriers and opportunities, addressing capacity issues, investing in communication, and building the ability to work across jurisdictions. There is room to increase the application of prescribed fire through improved communication, greater incentives, more funding, and finding creative solutions to capacity challenges. Improved public outreach and communication strategies are needed where air quality is a major consideration, but no one suggested that rewriting air quality laws was the solution. In some cases, like Oregon and Washington, interviewees cited the revision of their Smoke Management Plans as an opportunity to increase prescribed fire.

