

# Colorado State University Prescribed Fire Policy Brief

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## POLICY OPPORTUNITIES TO INCREASE THE USE OF PRESCRIBED FIRE

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We are a joint university-NGO team working to strengthen understanding among partners of federal policy options for increasing the use of prescribed burning. Our objectives are to: 1) Clarify prescribed fire policy barriers/opportunities; 2) Promote dialogue among partners to refine policy options; and 3) Communicate policy options to stakeholders and decision makers.

### Primary Forest Restoration Needs

There is widespread agreement in the scientific literature that increasing prescribed burning is essential to restoring the ecological integrity of forests and mitigating future wildfire risk. Short-term fire suppression and fire exclusion policies have led to a significant fire deficit relative to historical conditions in fire-prone forests in the western US. This has resulted in abnormally high fuel accumulation, fuel continuity, and tree density. Prescribed fire is necessary for completing restoration treatments, reaching areas that cannot be thinned mechanically, and maintaining sustainable forest health conditions. Increasing prescribed fire is our best option for mitigating the occurrence and effects of extreme wildfires in the future.

There is a need to increase the use of prescribed fire on millions of acres. Despite broad recognition of its value, prescribed fire is underutilized in the western US, with no meaningful increase in application for the past two decades. Estimates suggest that western federal land managers should increase the use of prescribed fire 3-8 times the current rate of treatment.

### Barriers to Increased Use of Prescribed Fire

Academic and practitioner papers have identified several major policy and administrative barriers constraining the increased application of prescribed fire, including:

- Insufficient number of highly trained burners, now and into the future, considering the need to scale up, and competition for existing federal, state, and private personnel.
- Inadequate funding dedicated to planning and implementing prescribed fire.
- Inadequate incentives, targets, and leadership to overcome planning and implementation challenges.
- Risk aversion, lack of training opportunities, liability concerns, and limited contracting mechanisms, particularly for engaging cooperative burn partners.
- Limited burn windows, smoke management regulations, and sometimes other ecological constraints, such as forest conditions or the presence of fire-intolerant species.

## Opportunities to Increase Prescribed Fire

We have identified the following key opportunities to increase prescribed fire:

1. As part of fire workforce modernization, dedicate personnel to prescribed fire even during wildland fire season; create more year-round positions and reconsider timing of trainings, so that staff members are available during burn windows that occur in fall through spring.
2. Develop a short- and long-term workforce development and training strategy, including for burn bosses, hand crews, grants and agreements staff, and fuels staff on forests.
3. Promote greater utilization of cooperative burning by reducing barriers for NGO partners, such as developing model partner agreements, allowing multi-partner agreements, supporting partner training, and eliminating cost-share requirements.
4. Elevate and improve government-to-government relationships regarding the role of tribes, treaty rights, and tribal fire management goals on public lands, and expand the influence and practice of cultural burning by Indigenous communities.
5. Dedicate funding to prescribed fire through CFLRP-type investments; consider a dedicated prescribed fire budget activity or key performance measure.
6. Streamline resource sharing among agencies by establishing common practices for regional agreements, determining the utility of national interagency agreement mechanisms for reimbursements, creating authority for funds to be used across jurisdictions, and determining how to streamline approaches with state and local wildland fire departments.
7. Design and implement performance metrics that track progress and maintenance over time in treatment areas (i.e., thinning, followed by burning, and then periodic maintenance burning) and develop outcomes-based performance measures (e.g., participatory mapping of priorities/goals and achievements for different locations).
8. Invest in internal agency problem-solving workgroups that collaborate with partners and elevate the role of fuels leads on agency leadership teams. Possible tasks/topics include: identifying NEPA-ready acres and effective NEPA implementation strategies; developing prioritization strategies for prescribed burning; increasing workforce mobility to treat priority acres; and investigating ongoing challenges with current workforce, performance measurement, and budget structures to identify barriers to progress and solutions.



### More Information

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