

BRINGING THE HEAT

FIRE AS A MANGEMENT TOOL FOR CALIFORNIA'S PRIVATE LANDS

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We both grew up in rural northern California, and if you talk to old timers in our communities, you'll hear stories of the deep connections between people and fire: of Native Americans lighting off of trails as they hiked out of their hunting grounds in the fall, and ranchers burning their fields to improve range and keep things open. Unfortunately, across much of California, these stories have become mere folklore—wistful anecdotes from a time with less regulation and more landowner autonomy. In most parts of the state, landowners aren't using fire anymore; the fear of liability, the perceived complexity of permits and regulations, and the generational and cultural gaps in fire experience have virtually eliminated fire from the toolbox for most landowners. But that's about to change.

For many years, we at University of California Cooperative Extension have fielded questions from landowners about using fire as a tool. Ranchers and forestland owners here in Humboldt County have voiced interest in using fire to improve range resources, enhance wildlife habitat, reduce fuels, and beat back the trees and shrubs that are quickly engulfing their prairies and woodlands, but we have struggled to provide them with good options.

In recent history, CAL FIRE has been the leader in private lands burning. In the 1980s, their Vegetation Management Program (VMP) was responsible for 30,000–65,000 acres of prescribed burning every year, but in recent decades, those numbers have consistently fallen short of 10,000 acres a year—a drop in the bucket given the habitat and fuels issues that we face in California. CAL FIRE is currently revamping the VMP, which is great news, but it's become clear that other pathways are needed for landowners to reclaim fire as the important tool that it is.

In 2016, we started looking into prescribed fire models from other parts of the country. We know that other regions have impressive burn programs that blow California out of the water, and in most of those places, they've been successful because landowners are doing the burning themselves—something that's almost unheard of in modern-day California.

One of the most promising models of landowner-

led burning is the prescribed burn association (PBA) model, through which landowners and other interested partners can work together to burn each other's properties. In many regions, these PBAs are spearheaded by the ranching community, in collaboration with conservation organizations like the National Wild Turkey Federation, Pheasants Forever, and others that see direct benefits for wildlife. In 2015, there were 62 PBAs, almost all of which were in the Great Plains and Texas. The PBA model has successfully spread into parts of the Southeast, too, but these types of efforts have been noticeably absent in the West.

In March 2017, we traveled to Nebraska to burn with, and learn from, two well-established PBAs. In both cases, the PBAs have local leaders who are not traditional fire practitioners; rather, they are local landowners—one a corn farmer and the other a cattle rancher—who have

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a vested interest in healthy rangelands and habitats. Throughout the year, these PBA leaders work with other local landowners to develop burn plans and prep units, and when optimal weather windows present themselves, the group gets together and conducts the burns. The PBA is mostly volunteer, and members contribute tools and equipment to help make the burns happen. PBA members typically volunteer on two or more burns before their projects make it onto the group's priority list. In this way, there is clear incentive to help each other out, and everyone benefits in the long term. Because of PBAs, burning has become a viable and effective treatment—one that provides unprecedented training opportunities to landowners, encourages community-wide collaboration, and is reversing trends of habitat and rangeland losses throughout the middle of the country. So why aren't we doing this in California?

Finally, we are! We returned home from Nebraska last year and started planning some burns. By the end of 2017, we had burned approximately 200 acres on four different ranches, and by March 2018, we'd officially formed the Humboldt County Prescribed Burn Association (HCPBA)—the first PBA in the West. In 2018, we accomplished another six burns totaling more than 500 acres, and we have a long list of projects to tackle in the coming months and years. In less than a year, the HCPBA has more than 60 paying members, a mailing list of 250 people, and has raised more than \$300,000 in grants for training, staffing, and equipment. The momentum has been impressive.

The California political climate is also ripe for this kind of work. The 2017 fire season spurred important legislative movement around fire, and this fall, the Governor signed three new bills that directly relate to prescribed fire: 1) SB901, which includes \$200 million per year for the next five years to fund forest health and fire prevention work, including prescribed fire; 2) SB1260, which is focused primarily on prescribed fire and includes pieces on liability and training; and 3) AB2091, which mandates the development of new insurance options for prescribed fire.

The tragic 2018 fire season has reinforced the dire need for this work throughout California, and the critical role community members and landowners need to play. It would have been easy for us to think that we couldn't do this in California—that the PBA model could only work somewhere like the Great Plains. But we've shown that this is doable, even in a county with some of the most expensive air quality permits in the state and some of the narrowest burn windows! It's time to put fire back in California's toolbox.

For more information and to get involved, send us an email: Lenya Quinn-Davidson, Area Fire Advisor, UCCE, lquinndavidson@ucanr.edu, and Jeffery Stackhouse, Livestock and Natural Resources Advisor, UCCE, jwstackhouse@ucanr.edu.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Lenya Quinn-Davidson served as a guest speaker at the CCA & CCW Convention. CCA thanks her for her time and for educating members on this topic.*



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