Accelerating the Use of Prescribed Fire Through Policy and Partnerships

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May 24th  Climate-focused Strategies and Opportunities for All-lands Practitioners

May 26th  Accelerating the Use of Prescribed Fire through Policy and Partnerships

June 1st  Economic Development Strategies for Rural Communities
RVCC engages a diverse network of community leaders across the West to advance policy solutions and promote peer learning that aligns public and private land stewardship with community benefit.
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Accelerating the Use of Prescribed Fire Through Policy and Partnerships

Goals for this Session:

● Unpack the complex terrain of federal policymaking entities and venues that will influence federal wildfire and fuels reduction strategies.

● Review RVCC’s and partners’ collective prescribed fire and cooperative burning advocacy interests and recommendations.

● Identify opportunities for engagement, coalition-building, and advocacy using existing or new venues and strategies.
Session Agenda

Segment 1:
- 10-10:15 (15 min) - Welcome and overview
- 10:15-10:45 (30 min) - Setting the Table
  - Current prescribed fire policy challenges
  - Current state of policy recommendations
  - Universe of active partners
  - Current political landscape
  - Q&A (time allowing)
  - Wrap-Up

Segment 2:
- 10:50-11:00 (10 min) - Log into Zoom Meeting, Break
- 10:50-11:30 (35 min) - Break-out group discussions
- 11:30-11:50 (20 min) - Full session debrief
- 11:50-12:00 (10 min) - Wrap-up and next steps
Setting the Table

Prescribed fire policy challenges, recommendations, achievements, and venues for future engagement
Prescribed Fire Policy Challenges

Where We Are

- Prescribed fire is underutilized in the western US (Kolden, 2019)
- It’s a critical step for fuels treatment/maintenance (Kalies and Kent, 2016)
- Accomplishments in recent decades & federal funding for rx fire have also decreased (Kolden, 2019)
- Not enough federal capacity especially during fire season
- R6 estimates currently treating 100,000-150,000 acres/year, need close to 800,000 acres/year
- CFLRP projects say they aren’t getting enough rx fire done
Prescribed Fire Policy Challenges

Ecological Needs

- Major fire deficit relative to historical condition in western North American forests
- Need to increase fire on 3-8x the acreage to restore/maintain conditions
- Need for prescribed fire to finish treatments, maintain desired conditions, and reach places that aren’t available for mechanical work
- Scientific consensus about need for fire: “We only have a choice about when and where to have smoke and fire” (Bertone-Riggs & Johnston, 2021).
Prescribed Fire Policy Challenges

Regional and Leadership Challenges

**Barriers**
- Workforce capacity
- Funding
- Burn windows and sometimes other restrictions
- Fuels staff lacks resources, support, and incentives to scale up
- Competing priorities, leadership, and risk tolerance

**Workforce and Agreement Needs**
- Rx fire working groups
- Local workforce and planning
- Daylighting resource sharing strategies and challenges
Prescribed Fire Policy Challenges

Regional Opportunities

● Put investments towards NEPA-ready acres
● Prioritize forests with regular fire intervals
● Building a dedicated workforce and staffing fuels teams
● Resource sharing/strategic planning across forests to treat priority acres
● Collaborative groups at different levels
Recap: Key Barriers to Increase the Use of Rx Fire

- Workforce capacity
- Funding for prescribed fire
- Resource sharing
- Output and outcomes-based targets
- Leadership and incentives
Ongoing Engagement Strategies

- Direct advocacy
  - Hill testimony
  - Informal Congressional outreach
  - Agency engagement

- RVCC white paper on policy barriers to rx fire

- RVCC report and case studies on partnerships and rx fire

Round-up of rx fire policy recommendations

(March 2022) RVCC report and case studies on partnerships and rx fire

(July 2021) RVCC white paper on policy barriers to rx fire
Recommendations and Priorities Addressed:

- Cooperative Burning / Partnerships
  - Agreement processes
  - Fireline qualifications and management systems
  - Liability
- Funding
  - Increase funding to new and existing programs
- Business model
  - Performance measures and budgeting
- Workforce
  - Augmenting the Forest Service’s rx fire workforce
  - Local workforce
  - Tribal co-management
Round-up of rx fire policy recommendations

Partners’ Recommendations

- More funding and capacity (improved crew availability and experience)

- Improving internal incentives to burn - redesigned performance measures, or the creation of special initiatives with funding that units and collaborative partners could compete for

- Increase agency staff education about liability issues, provide assurances against personal liability, clarify liability exposure

- More efficient and effective avenues for resource sharing; more resources for grants and agreements and contracting staff to leverage greater external capacity
Other active partners in the Rx Fire space

- Wildland Fire Leadership Council (WFLC, national) workgroup
- Western Cohesive Strategy Group workgroup
- The Nature Conservancy’s Fire Networks (Fire Learning Network, TREX, Indigenous Peoples Burning Network, Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network)
- Hewlett Foundation and other private philanthropy-supported policy workgroups
- State-level workgroups, many of who also delve into federal policy issues
- State and sub-state level Rx Fire Councils
- Coalition of Prescribed Fire Councils, Inc.
- Several academic research partnerships exploring barriers and solutions
- RVCC’s current engagement and policy leadership
- Please drop other efforts you’re aware of or participating in the chat!
Current Political Landscape
Current Political Landscape

Political Challenge of Prescribed Fire

- Forest Service pause and review of prescribed fire
  - Calf Canyon / Hermits Peak Fire
- Limited pushback from some in the environmental community
- Smoke as a public health issue
- False choice between mechanical thinning and Rx fire

A FWS prescribed fire at the Darling National Wildlife Refuge in Florida.
Photo by Brian Pippin, FWS
Increased Congressional Attention to Prescribed Fire

- Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act
  - $3.37 billion for wildland firefighting and wildfire risk reduction
  - $500M of dedicated funding for Rx fire
- Increased interest in oversight
  - Oversight hearings
  - Performance measures
  - Wildfire Commission
- Regular appropriations
- 2024 Farm Bill
  - Opportunity to clean up IIJA
Administration Priorities

- Executive Order on old growth
  - Strong recognition of the need to manage to create fire resilience
- Performance measures
  - Moving beyond annual outputs to outcomes
- Creation of the Wildfire Resilience Interagency Working Group

Current Political Landscape

A FWS prescribed fire at the Camas National Wildlife Refuge in Idaho. Photo by FWS
Agency Responses

- USDA 10-year Strategy - “Confronting the Wildfire Crisis”
  - Consistent reference to Rx fire
- 10 priority landscapes
  - IIJA decision-making may occur at Regional and Forest levels
- DOI Wildfire Risk Five-Year Monitoring, Maintenance, and Treatment Plan
  - Speaks to Rx fire and calls out TREX and other Rx fire training
Wildland Fire Leadership Council (WFLC)

- Intergovernmental committee of Federal, Tribal, state, county, and municipal partners that support the development and consistent implementation of wildland fire policies, goals, and activities
- Est. 2002 by the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior to provide an intergovernmental committee to support the implementation and coordination of Federal Fire Management Policy
- Ongoing, established body
- Currently tasked with refreshing the Cohesive Strategy, among other things
President’s Wildfire Resilience Interagency Working Group (IWG)

- “(C)oordinate strategies for battling wildfires, including investments in forest thinning and prescribed fire” *E&E News*
- Co-led by USDA, DOI and the Office of Management and Budget and reporting to the cabinet-level National Climate Task Force
- May be a venue for review of administrative change

Photo credit: Forest Service, USDA. 170103-FS-XXX-XXX-003
Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission

- Created by IIJA
- One year to complete recommendations to Congress
- Broad mission (aircraft review, fire response, community risk reduction, post-fire recovery, NEPA, etc.)
- “an evaluation, including recommendations to improve the effectiveness in mitigating wildland fires, which may include authorizing prescribed fires”
- Secretarial co-chairs, agency seats, and external partners
Interrelationship of IWG, WFLC and Commission

- Different enabling origins - Administrative and Congressional
- Overlapping efforts and participation
- Administrative interest in linking efforts with products feeding into the Commission
- Opportunities for partners to present policy ideas, be it in one or all of the venues
- Commission is the most time-limited and most direct communication of recommendations to Congress
  - May be an opportunity to offer pre-packaged policy recommendations
Thank you for joining the first segment of our session!

For those staying for discussion - Please log out and log back in using your Zoom Meeting invite. THEN, turn off camera and sound and begin the break.

Thank you!