

# Fire Management *today*

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**LEADERS ON THE  
WORLD STAGE**



United States Department of Agriculture  
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# A HANDS-ON PRESCRIBED FIRE WORKSHOP FOR AGENCY LINE OFFICERS



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The Prescribed Fire Training Center (PFTC) is an interagency center located in Tallahassee, FL. Founded in 1998, PFTC hosts week-long workshops for agency administrators and resource specialists and 21-day sessions for fire practitioners. The center's mission is "to provide opportunities for Federal, State, local, and tribal government agencies and other organizations to build skills and knowledge of prescribed fire, *with an emphasis on field experience.*" This mission emphasizes practical experience in field operations as a basis for developing and conducting successful prescribed fire programs and building support for prescribed fire programs among agency administrators, program managers, resource specialists, and the general public.

## Diverse Staff, Targeted Students

The interagency composition of the staff has been a strong component of PFTC's success. The composition of the cadre for this workshop has changed over the years, but the interagency component has remained. The cadre has consisted of representatives from the Forest Service; the U.S. Department of the Interior, U.S. Fish and Wildlife



Lori Bell, Forest Service attendee, and Patrick Morgan, Forest Service cadre, during a prescribed burn with the Georgia Forestry Commission in 2009. Photo: Greg Seamon, The Nature Conservancy.

Service, National Park Service, and Bureau of Land Management; the Department of Defense; the Florida Division of Forestry; The Nature Conservancy; and private consultants.

The idea for offering a workshop on prescribed fire for agency administrators and line officers came from multiple sources. Attendees to PFTC's 21-day training sessions expressed the common view that prescribed burning on their home units was limited by the line officers' lack of experience and a

need for direction in existing fire programs. Additionally, agency administrators expressed a desire to become more familiar with their role in building and supporting a prescribed fire program. Since 2002, the center has offered eight workshops on prescribed fire specifically for agency administrators.

Past class size has varied from 12 to 30 participants. Participants have come from throughout the country—Alaska to Florida, New Hampshire to California—representing a cross-section of agencies—the

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*"I like the interagency composition of PFTC, the commitment to mission, and the truly outstanding staff."  
—Rob Fallon, District Ranger, Allegheny National Forest*



Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, Department of Defense, The Nature Conservancy, State programs, and one international participant (see Tables 1 and 2 for a breakdown of attendees by agency and State). Participants have commented positively on the interagency composition of the groups and the cadre. Marcia Garcia, deputy district ranger from the Santa Fe National Forest, commented, "The blend of people from different agencies was great."

Many attendees applauded the opportunity to share experiences from their home unit with other participants and to build a professional network as they move forward in their careers.

### Building Each Workshop

In building the curriculum, there are certain core subject areas, such as burn plans, the role of the agency administrator, and inter-agency collaboration, but the final agenda and discussion topics are determined after a discussion with

attendees on the first day of the workshop. Each participant submits a list of five expectations for the training; additionally, a portion of the first full day is spent gathering more input on attendees' specific needs and expectations. The cadre then works to incorporate those requests into curriculum. Jim Ozenberger, deputy district ranger on the Hiawatha National Forest, commented, "PFTC continually sought students' expectations and developed their curriculum around those expectations. We met and exceeded all of our expectations." Keith Lannon, district ranger on the Cherokee National Forest, stated, "I was impressed with the staff's ability to modify the course schedule on the fly to meet the needs of the participants."

The relaxed atmosphere of the presentations, discussions on topics of interest, and the mix of classroom and field activities promote active participation. In addition, cadre group leaders rotate through groups each day during field exercises and change the makeup of the groups to encourage interaction among the participants in a personal setting. Many attendees applauded the opportunity to share experiences from their home unit with other participants and to build a professional network as they move forward in their careers. The focus on interagency cooperation highlights similarities among the various agencies, as the majority of the attendees work from the same burn plan template in the new Interagency Prescribed Fire

Table 1—Agency participants since 2002.

Agency	Number of Participants
Bureau of Indian Affairs	5
Bureau of Land Management	4
U.S. Department of Defense	5
National Park Service	6
Forest Service	90
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service	12
The Nature Conservancy	1
States	3
International (Belize)	1

Table 2—State participants since 2002.

State	Participants	State	Participants	State	Participants
AK	2	KY	1	OK	1
AL	1	LA	1	OR	3
AR	1	MA	1	PA	2
AZ	15	MI	3	SC	1
CA	6	MN	1	TN	3
CO	8	MS	2	TX	2
FL	8	MT	2	UT	8
GA	3	NC	2	VA	4
IA	1	NE	3	WA	1
ID	5	NH	1	WI	1
IL	1	NM	8	WV	4
IN	2	NV	4	WY	8
KS	3	OH	3	Belize	1

Planning and Implementation Guide in Forest Service Manual 5100 (2008).

## Addressing Agency Administrator Training Needs

This workshop has been sanctioned under the Forest Service Manual, Chapter 5140.7.2, to qualify as the line officer training requirement for approving prescribed fire plans. For U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service line officers, this workshop meets the Interagency Standards for Fire and Fire Aviation Operations for line officer and agency administrator training for approving prescribed burn plans. Other Department of the Interior agencies are considering recommending this training for staff who approve prescribed fire plans as well. Mandatory or not, the workshop offers a unique, interactive curriculum that diversifies and strengthens any line officer's skills.

Training is also tailored to address the specific training needs of agency administrators. While no two workshops contain exactly the same material, recurring themes include: understanding the elements of the burn plan and the Go/No Go checklist, the roles and responsibilities of the agency administrator in managing a successful fuels management program, ways to gain and maintain public acceptance and support for prescribed fire use, and understanding agency and personal risks and liabilities associated with prescribed fire programs and how to mitigate them.

## Taking It to the Field

Emphasis in the weeklong workshop is on practice. "This is a model training program. The hands-on experience of burning is a power-



*Participants conduct pre-burn planning during 2010 workshop at Wekiwa Springs State Park, FL. Photo: Greg Seamon, The Nature Conservancy.*



*Chad Hudson, district ranger on the Ocala National Forest, and Jeff Rivera, district ranger on the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest, pause during the prescribed burn at Blackwater River State Forest, FL, in 2011. Photo: John Fry, National Park Service.*

ful example of learning by doing," said John Fry, chief of resource management at Cumberland Island National Seashore, after participating in two burns during the 2011 workshop. Though weather always has an impact on what type of field activities are possible, the workshop endeavors to include burn planning and live-fire operations to the greatest extent possible.

Over the years, the workshop has conducted live-fire exercises with a number of cooperators, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Forest Service, the U.S. Department of Defense, the National Park Service, the Florida Division of Forestry, Florida State Parks, and the Georgia Forestry Commission. The center ensures that all cadre are red-carded at crew



boss or higher levels, and participants are escorted by staff members wherever they go along the fireline. All participants are required to wear full personal protective equipment (PPE) for these exercises.

One field day is spent burning with a cooperater and focuses on ignition techniques to meet ecological objectives. Participants have the opportunity to drag a torch along the perimeter or within a burn unit and experience operations from the point of view of the fire staffs on their home units. Another day, participants fill the overhead role (burn boss and firing boss) on a prescribed burn: they are required to make ignition decisions for the burn—usually a small, low intensity burn with a 1- to 2-year rough. Participants have a “safety net” of experienced staff for support but are expected to communicate with other students and direct the operation themselves. As Tina Lanier, district ranger on the Lewis and Clark National Forest, expressed: “I thought this was by far the best fire training and one of the best line officer training sessions I’ve been through. The course structure of building from the ground up

*“As an agency administrator, I now have a better idea of what to look for in a burn plan when I review it and what to expect on burn day.”*

—Donna Peterson, Deputy Superintendent, Papago Agency

was a very effective way to learn. It helped me put in perspective and see the big picture.”

Other field days have been spent visiting line officers and fire staff in existing programs and discussing how to run an effective prescribed fire unit. As a result of such discussions, “I feel much more comfortable with burning and the issues associated with it, especially risk management and how to mature a burn program,” said Tobin Roop, superintendent at Salinas Pueblo Missions National Monument.

## Classroom Discussions and Activities

Back in the classroom, one valued roundtable discussion examines prescribed fire case studies from around the country. These case studies highlight the role of the agency administrator and the actions they took. As Donna Mickley, district ranger on the

Rogue-Siskiyou National Forest, stated, “There is nothing more valuable than the real-life scenarios the cadre was able to share with us. Those are the most teachable moments.”

An extension of this discussion is a half-day of sandtable role-playing exercises. The activity is focused on the role of the agency administrator as it evolves over the course of the simulated operation. Rondi Fischer, district ranger on the Monongahela National Forest, accurately captured the views of the majority of participants when she said, “I hate role playing exercises, but this one was so well-planned and well-facilitated that I really enjoyed it and got a lot out of it.” Participants rotate through three different roles: agency administrators, observers, and outside influencers. Half of the workshop participants engage in the sandtable exercise at one time. This group is separated into three smaller groups at the beginning of the scenario. One group will begin as agency administrators involved in a prescribed fire and may fill the role of a district ranger, forest supervisor, fire staff officer, regional forester, etc. A second group will observe the decisions made by the administrator group and discuss those actions among themselves. The third group plays the roles of outside influencers such as media representatives, elected officials, recreation users, etc. This group interacts with the administrator group. Cadre fill the roles of burn boss, crew, dispatch and scenario facilitators. Each group rotates through each set of roles. There is a



*Gloria Nielsen, district ranger on the National Forests of Alabama, ignites a prescribed fire on Ocala National Forest at the 2010 workshop. Photo: Greg Seamon, The Nature Conservancy.*

brief discussion of what took place prior to each rotation and a longer after action review at the conclusion of the exercise.

Simultaneously with the sandtable exercise, the other half of the group participates in a discussion of unit burn plans. Prior to training, each attendee submits a burn plan from their home unit for discussion, a group of cadre members reviews the burn plans, and the merits and weak points of each are discussed.

## Wrap-up

As part of an internal assessment, organizers gather and analyze responses from attendees at the conclusion of every workshop. The attendees typically express a better understanding of agency administrator responsibilities regarding prescribed fire, a greater appreciation for the components of a burn plan, an opportunity to build professional relationships, and increased confidence in implementing and guiding a successful prescribed fire program.

Linda Jackson, District Ranger on the Prescott National Forest, summed up her training by saying, "this was the best line officer workshop I have attended in my 7 years as a line officer. This was well worth attending and I will highly recommend it to others." Other positive comments came from Drew Milroy, natural resource manager at Westover Air Reserve Base, who said, "If there is a secret, executive level list of best Federal courses, this one should be on it." Anne Morkill, project manager for the Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuges, added "This course gave me the knowledge and the confidence in managing a complex fire management program on my refuge and to demonstrate that confidence to my staff and the

"This is a model training program. The hands-on experience of burning is a powerful example of learning by doing,"



*A group of participants in the 2010 workshop study a prescribed burn scenario in a sandtable exercise. Photo: Mike Dueitt, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.*



*2004 workshop attendees on a field trip to Panther National Wildlife Refuge, FL, discussing post-fire monitoring and meeting burn objectives. Photo: Prescribed Fire Training Center.*

public." "Absolutely one of the best courses I have ever taken in 22 years with the Forest Service," stated Jerry Ingersoll, deputy forest supervisor on the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest. "The course provided a mix of lecture, discussion, hands-on experience, modeling, and role playing that could not have been better designed or implemented anywhere."

Though this workshop requires a commitment of 9 days (including travel), participants report that the knowledge and experience they gained made it worthwhile. Lori Wood, district ranger on the Dixie National Forest, said simply, "Every line officer would benefit from this workshop." ■