

In Bastrop's Ashes, Officials Find a Lesson in Prescribed Burning

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By Mose Buchele



Photo by Mose Buchele.

Greg Creacy is responsible for prescribed burning in Texas State Parks. He believes the benefits of the program are visible in the aftermath of the Bastrop County Complex Fire. In this photo, you can see forest hit by the Bastrop wildfire. On the left side, an area that had seen prescribed burns before the fire. On the right, an area that did not have prescribed burns before the fire.

Imagine that you're in a house in the country. There's a frantic knock at the door. You open it to find a group of men and women wearing fireproof gear, asking permission to fight a raging wildfire on your property.

“But there’s no fire here,” you respond in confusion.

“You don’t understand,” they say, “the fire won’t be here for another few years, but we need to fight it now!”

The scenario might sound fantastic, but it makes perfect sense to Larry Joe Doherty.

“That is precisely the whole point of prescribed burning,” he said recently over a lunch of red beans and rice at his Washington County ranch. “You wait around for an emergency and it’s too late!”

Doherty has worn a lot of hats in his life. He used to wear a cowboy hat as the judge in the courtroom TV show [Texas Justice](#). He’s also a trial lawyer and once ran for Congress. Now, he’s in the public eye for another reason. He’s become an advocate of prescribed burning as the president of the [Prescribed Burn Alliance of Texas](#).

‘We Take the Wild Out of Wildfire’

Doherty became interested in prescribed burning when he started doing it on his ranch. The logic behind the practice is simple. “It takes three things for a wildfire to start,” Doherty says, “Oxygen, ignition and fuel, and if any one of those three are missing, you’re not going to have a fire!”



Photo by Mose Buchele

Larry Joe Doherty says prescribed burns on his ranch have increase plant diversity and made the area safer in case of wildfires.

You can’t get rid of oxygen. And, while county-issued “burn bans” are meant to deprive wildfires of ignition, history shows that they are not always effective.

Last year, Doherty points out, nearly every county in the state had enacted burn bans. That did not stop it from being the [worst wildfire season in Texas history](#). He calls burn bans “useless” and argues that, if an unintended campfire doesn’t serve as a spark, a downed power line surely will.

“The wildfires that sprung up, they had no respect for the counties’ burn bans, they happened anyway and they’re going to continue to happen,” he tells StateImpact Texas.

That is, unless you control the third element: fuel.

The best way to do that, according to prescribed burning advocates, is through carefully burning all that dry grass and brush. Burn it on your own terms, they say. Burn it under expert guidance before it builds into fuel for a wildfire of epic proportions like it did in 2011 in Bastrop County.

‘Not Natural At All’

There is a notion that wildfires, as destructive as they are, are at least natural. That they are an unfortunate condition of living in proximity to the uncultivated world.

It is a notion that [Mike Fisher](#) would like to disabuse you of.

Fisher, as the head of Bastrop County Emergency Management services, was in charge of firefighting efforts during the historic Bastrop County Complex Fire. Of that inferno that killed two people, burned nearly 1,700 homes and decimated 96 percent of Bastrop State Park, he says “there was nothing natural at all.”

Under natural conditions the land would have burned many times over the years. Instead it burned once, and destroyed everything in its path.

This is how decades of fire suppression contributed to the severity of the blaze. As people move into the woods, Fisher says, suppression is something that he and other firefighters have to do.

“It’s frustrating for those of us who understand fire,” he says. For every small fire they put out, they may be postponing a fire that will grow to uncontrollable strength.

An Accidental Laboratory

To see how effective prescribed burns can be, one need only venture into Bastrop’s burn zone, an area that became an accidental laboratory for prescribed burning after last year’s fires.



Photo by Mose Buchele

TPWD's Creacy says the dirt road was not enough of a fire break to protect the forest. The fact that he had burned all the fuel on the forest floor to the left of the road a year earlier, protected that section of Bastrop State Park from the fire.

"We're standing in Bastrop State Park in an area that was impacted by the 2011 wildfire," says Greg Creacy.

Creacy is the regional natural resources coordinator for [Texas Parks and Wildlife](#), and the devastation around him speaks for itself.

He's driven me out to a narrow dirt road on the eastern edge of the park. To show me how prescribed burns can lessen the severity of a wildfire. On the right side of the road we see the now familiar black sticks jutting from the ground, the sad emblems of what's left of the Lost Pines.

But on left side of the road, the view is altogether different. The trees are green and thriving, the forest floor is alive with underbrush. It looks almost like there was never a fire at all.

"We're looking at the difference between a forest that was previously burned with a prescribed fire, one year earlier on one side of the road, and on the other side of the road that forest stand had never been treated with a prescribed fire," Creacy explains.

"All of the trees are dead on the side that had never been treated with a prescribed fire. And the trees are green on the side of the road where we had previously conducted a prescribed fire," he says.

The reason for the difference is not the road that divides the two stands of trees, he says. The crown fire that ravaged Bastrop State Park, after all, jumped multi-lane highways with apparent ease.

Burning Questions of Policy

Prescribed burn advocates say there are a few things the state could be doing to make it easier to burn in Texas. Both Larry Joe Doherty and [Charles Taylor](#), a Texas A&M Range Land Management professor, say liability insurance is nearly impossible to come by for crews who want to burn. They'd like to see the state subsidize insurance for prescribed burns.

There are also those pesky burn bans.

"We need state legislators to allow us to do more burning in burn bans," says Taylor. He says the lack of uniformity in burn bans county-by-county are a huge impediment to prescribed burning.

But convincing the public, and the lawmakers they elect, could be difficult. Advocates like to say they are fighting decades of "Smokey the Bear" teaching people that all fire is bad.

On top of that, prescribed burns do occasionally get out of control.

Earlier this year, the governor of Colorado declared a moratorium on prescribed burns when one set by the Colorado Forest Service [sparked a wildfire](#) that claimed three lives.

It's something that Taylor admits "gives a black eye" to the practice. But, he argues, "just because there's a plane crash doesn't mean people stop riding planes."

Despite the accidents, advocates say prescribed burning is gaining acceptance in Texas. The alternative, they say, will inevitably lead us to another fiery season like we saw last year.