



Prescribed Fire Associations

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A Prescribed Fire Association is a group of landowners and other concerned citizens that form a partnership to conduct prescribed burns. Prescribed burning is the key land management tool used to restore and maintain native plant communities to their former diversity and productivity for livestock production and wildlife habitat. Native prairies, shrublands, and forests supply the majority of livestock forage and 99.9% of the wildlife habitat in Oklahoma. Without fire, native plant communities become dysfunctional and unproductive. Research has clearly shown that there is no substitute for fire. Oklahoma's ecosystems are fire dependent and not burning is poor land management.

Why do not more people use prescribed fire to manage their land? First, fire was not part of the European culture that has come to dominate the Oklahoma landscape for more than 100 years. Fire exclusion and fire suppression had been engrained in our society for years and popularized by the very successful Smokey the Bear ad campaign. The results of which has been a rapid decline in the quality of our natural resources, along with costing taxpayers millions of dollars each year to fight wildfires and the many other negative consequences of fuel build up.

There are four excuses that are often used when people are asked, "Why don't you use prescribed fire?" The first and foremost is liability. Liability should be a concern but not to the point of inaction. There is little evidence in case law that properly conducted prescribed fires have resulted in significant sums of money being exchanged as a result of damages. Much of the perception of risk is generated by media coverage of wildfires, which have nothing to do with prescribed fire. The second excuse is, "I do not have enough training or experience." The third excuse is "I don't have enough people to help me." The fourth excuse is "I don't have enough equipment." All of these answers will result in not burning and not taking care of your land. Eventually you will be out of business regardless of your interests.

Forming a prescribed fire association deals directly with the four reasons of why some people do not use prescribed fire. You still have to have insurance for liability, but you manage risk by having the proper training, experienced help, and

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proper equipment provided by the association. You attend prescribed fire workshops, but you also help other association members conduct burns. This hands-on assistance allows you to gain experience and confidence with prescribed fire. You do not have to hire labor, because you now have neighbors helping neighbors. Association members pool their equipment so that no one person has to buy all the equipment. One person may have a drip torch, another person a slip-on cattle sprayer, while another member has a four-wheeler, and yet another has a tractor and disk for preparing firebreaks. All of this equipment and labor allows you to safely conduct prescribed burns.

Starting a Prescribed Fire Association

First, call a meeting of interested citizens. Make sure to involve key members of the community, landowners, lessees, federal and state land management agencies, and local fire departments. You must then pick a leader. The association has to be a grass roots organization that is locally led. Government organizations are only there to provide technical assistance and guidance. If no one from the community steps forward to lead and encourage others the association will not be successful.

When forming an association there should be a set of goals and objectives to help guide the way. These goals listed below are adapted from the Edwards Plateau Prescribed Burning Association, Inc (EPPBA) located in Sonora, Texas.

- Share Equipment
- Share Labor
- Train Our Membership
- Foster good relations between neighbors and within the community in regards to the use of prescribed fire.

Other associations have also adopted similar goals and objectives. These goals outline what an association should do. Teach and train the landowners/managers how to use prescribed fire safely and properly, as well as educate those in the community about the positive aspects of prescribed burning. The last part is the most important. To have a viable prescribed fire program you must gain the support of the community. Listed below are guidelines that have been compiled from associations that are active as of 2005.

Guidelines for Prescribe Fire Associations

- Elect officers (President, Vice-President, and Secretary/Treasurer) and a Board of Directors (one or two from each county if multiple counties are involved) - landowners/lessees' only – agency/university personnel can only provide technical assistance.
- Dues-\$25.00/year (used to buy equipment).
- Fire Training School (annual) - Safety, equipment use, techniques.
- Fire Plans - prepared by landholder with help from agency or extension.
- Liability - landholder assumes liability for fire and must show proof of insurance before burn.
- Firebreaks - landholder responsible for preparing firebreaks and they must be adequate.
- Personnel on Burn - have a minimum number that must be present on each burn.
- Equipment - have an inventory of what is available.
- Burn Participation - members must assist with a certain number of burns, before their land is burned.

Associations should be incorporated. Incorporation is simple, and all the association needs to do is get a copy of SOS form 009 Certificate of Incorporation (Not for Profit) from the web at <http://www.sos.state.ok.us/forms/FM0008.PDF> or contact the Oklahoma Secretary of State for a copy. Follow the procedures and submit the forms with a filing fee back to the secretary of state's office. Incorporation also allows the association to gain non-profit status 501(c)(3). The non-profit status precludes the association from paying taxes. It also makes dues, donations, gifts, and contributions tax-deductible. The association becomes eligible for grants from public agencies and private foundations that donate to non-profit corporations. The association also becomes eligible for a bulk-mailing permit. For information about obtaining non-profit 501(c)(3) status obtain the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) form 1023 from the IRS website or at a local IRS office.

Some associations use rural fire department equipment for conducting prescribed burns. For example, the Edwards Plateau Prescribed Burning Association has been allowed to use a fire truck belonging to the Sonora Volunteer Fire Department. The fire department rented the truck to association members for a year, and then they sold the fire truck for a \$1.00 to the Edwards Plateau Soil and Water Conservation District so it would be available to the association members anytime they burned. The Big Pasture Prescribed Burning Association uses trucks and personnel from several different volunteer fire departments when it burns depending on location. Some volunteer fire departments require a donation or rental fee for these services. Joining forces with a volunteer fire department is a benefit to both parties. It gives the burn association added equipment, personnel, and safety, while it gives the VFD some training time, added income, and community service. In addition, both parties have a positive impact on our natural resources and community safety.

Another benefit of a prescribed fire association is its ability to have strength in numbers and influence politics. When members of the community band together with the same goals, while safely applying fire to the landscape, many community members will lend their support. They will also enjoy the benefits of prescribed fire in their area including reduction of wildland fuels for wildfire protection, enhanced native wildlife and plant habitat, enhanced livestock habitat, improved water quality and quantity, and elimination of eastern redcedar. An equally important aspect of forming an association is public education, especially for youth that will provide benefits for future generations.

At this time (2005) there are seven prescribed burning associations in Oklahoma, with six in Texas, one in Colorado, and one association in California that has existed since 1956.

Prescribed Burning Associations in Oklahoma

Big Pasture Prescribed Burning Association, Inc.

Formed in 2001 and covers Comanche, Cotton, Kiowa, Jefferson, Stephens, and Tillman counties.

Northwest Range Fire Management Association, Inc.

Formed in 2002 and covers Dewey and southern Woodward counties.

North Central Range Improvement Association

Formed in 2004 and is located in Noble County.

Cross Timbers Prescribed Burning Association

Formed in 2004 and is located in Lincoln County.

Arbuckle Restoration Association

Formed 2004 and covers Carter, Johnston, and Murray counties.

Salt Creek Burn Association

Formed 2005 and covers southern Pottawatomie and southern Seminole counties.

Cimarron Range Preservation Association

Formed in 2005 and covers Woods, Alfalfa, and northern Woodward counties.

For information about membership in these associations contact the Oklahoma Cooperative extension office or USDA-NRCS office in the respective county.

Other articles about prescribed burning associations

Burn Baby Burn! The Oklahoma Cowman. February 2003.

Ring of Fire. The Cattleman. February 2003.

Management By Fire. Beef. August 1999.

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