



Policy Barriers to Prescribed Fire: Perspectives from Across the West

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MAIN QUESTIONS OR ISSUES THAT YOU ADDRESSED

What are the policy barriers that exist in law, regulation, or agency policy that are limiting the ability of the US Forest Service and BLM to conduct more prescribed fire? What are strategies and where are there opportunities to improve practice?

LOCATION AND ECOSYSTEM INVESTIGATED

We are investigating the 11 western states, although we have only completed interviews at this point with about half of our targeted interviewees and in only eight states to date.

KEY FINDINGS OF YOUR RESEARCH

The majority of individuals from both federal and state land management agencies said that the greatest barriers to conducting more prescribed fire on public lands are a lack of adequate capacity and funding to conduct burning, challenges associated with using agreements to share resources across agencies, and limited internal incentives to conduct more prescribed fire. People emphasized that often their fire personnel are on wildland firefighting assignments during burn windows. Some noted that, given the many challenges and limited incentives, whether a unit has a strong prescribed fire program comes down to line officer leadership and the commitment of individual fire managers. Others said that media coverage and political attention related to fire events can cause politicians and agency leadership to restrict units' ability to apply fire, sometimes in distant locations and for many years. At the same time, strong partnerships with the media, the public, and collaborative stakeholders can support the application of prescribed fire, sometimes relatively soon after destructive fire events. The majority of interviewees have reported that, while air quality regulation is a challenge, it is not the main barrier to implementing prescribed fire and rarely is the variable that prevents them from doing more burning. However, we expect that air quality challenges are greatest in California, Oregon, and Washington, and we are just beginning to collect data in these states. Interviewees said that communication between land managers and state environmental agencies is essential to building an understanding of each agency's priorities and capitalizing on opportunities to increase the application of fire. Interviewees said partnerships, smoke management liaisons or working groups, and strong lines of communication provide

This research was presented at the 7th International Fire Ecology and Management Congress, which was held in Orlando, Florida, November 28-December 2, 2017 and was hosted by the Association for Fire Ecology, in cooperation with the Southern Fire Exchange.

opportunities to share knowledge, combine resources, and capitalize on opportunities to apply prescribed fire. As one person explained, “Smoke is not about regulating but about communicating.” There is a diversity of approaches to air quality management and prescribed burn permitting across the Western states. There may be opportunities to share successful strategies more effectively across states. Most people have said that the approach to permitting in each state is not as important as whether burners have strategies for considering their collective impacts on air quality and communicating with regulatory agencies to identify available opportunities. Opportunities exist to improve practice by addressing capacity issues, investing in communication, particularly around smoke management, increasing strategies for sharing resources, and building the ability to work across jurisdictions. Agency interviewees also emphasized the need for improved agency support of prescribed burning. This could include creating more incentives to burn, hiring people with prescribed fire experience, and increasing training opportunities. Despite the challenges, our work to date indicates that there is room to increase the application of prescribed fire through improved communication, greater incentives, and finding creative solutions to capacity challenges.

HOW DID YOU ANSWER THE MAIN QUESTIONS OR INFORM THE ISSUES?

We are conducting interviews with fuels program leads from both land management agencies, DEQs, state forestry personnel, and key partners.

HOW MIGHT/WILL IT INFLUENCE FIRE MANAGEMENT DECISIONS OR PRACTICES?

Our findings will help the fire management community understand where the primary barriers are to doing more prescribed fire and where there are ready opportunities to overcome barriers.

WHO IS THE MAIN END-USER OF YOUR RESEARCH?

We will deliver our findings to agency leadership and staff, and to partners who work with the agencies to communicate their perspectives on necessary changes to policy makers at the state and national level and to agency leadership. We also will share our findings broadly with the fire science community.

CONGRESS SESSION

Policy Issues