

Prescribed Fire Cooperatives:

Working Together for a Safe Burn

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Prescribed burning is an important tool for managing natural resources, forests, wildlife, and eco-restoration in Alabama. Fire is essential in the management of numerous fire-dependant species. *Nothing* takes it place. Mechanical fuels treatment, herbicides, and grazing may simulate the natural phenomenon of fire and be considered surrogates, but they do not mimic fire. Nothing has the same impact on the flora, fauna, and soil solution as fire. It has been said that we have an ecological imperative to use prescribed fire.

Prescribed fire is a SAFE way to apply a natural process, ensure ecosystem health, and reduce wildfire risk. Fire can be a low-cost technique for a landowner to achieve natural resource objectives.

Each year in Alabama, prescribed burning is conducted on approximately 900,000 acres. Of the 32.5 million acres that make up Alabama, approximately 70 percent are forested: 22.7 million acres. Of those, approximately 41 percent or 9.4 million acres are pine.

While there are valid management applications of prescribed fire in Alabama, for the sake of this article consider those 9.4 million acres. If half of those pine acres – 4.7 million acres – are in an age class where fire is an appropriate silvicultural tool, how many acres should prescribed burning be conducted on annually? In order to maintain ecosystem health and reduce wildfire risk, pine acres should probably be burned every two to five years, depending on the management objective. That means Alabama forest landowners should be burning between 940,000 and 2.35 million acres annually.

How do we get from where we are to where we should be? What are the reasons



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landowners are not burning? Some say cost; others say fear . . . fear of the unknown. They are afraid of fire in general, which is probably a healthy thing, and they are afraid of liability, which is a real issue. However, in Alabama a prescribed fire properly done by a Certified Prescribed Burn Manager minimizes and mitigates the risk.

The federal, state, and non-government organization (NGO) lands in Alabama are probably being burned at an appropriate rate. The need to ramp up prescribed burning in Alabama is on private lands. There are several opportunities to empower private landowners to effectively burn with confidence. The primary method is made possible through Alabama's Prescribed Burning Act (Code of Alabama, Section 9-13-270), sometimes referred to as the "Right to Burn" Law. That law states that Alabama landowners have the right to burn their land for certain purposes such as forestry, wildlife, and agriculture. The law also says that the landowner and Certified Prescribed Burn Manager have limited liability protection in the absence of negligence when the prescribed burn is conducted in a specific manner.

A second opportunity to ramp up prescribed burning on private forest and agricultural lands in the state is the formation of prescribed burn cooperatives. The cost of burning can be prohibitive when analyzed in a discounted cash flow evaluation of the economic value of a pine rotation. Many landowners appear to include other values in their management strategy such as aesthetics, recreation, wildlife habitat, etc. However, costs can be

minimized when the landowner or a family member takes an active role in the burn.

A landowner is not required to have expensive equipment and all the latest bells and whistles in order to burn prudently and efficiently. Many times the landowner can use materials and equipment already on hand for other operations. Landowners can also form relationships with neighbors and share the workload . . . neighbor helping neighbor. One neighbor may have certain equipment and skills while the other neighbor has different equipment and skills. By pooling their resources, they can get their burning done safely and effectively.

In Oklahoma, prescribed burning cooperatives have been functioning effectively for several years. Occasionally the cooperative owns the equipment. Sometimes the cooperative carries liability insurance. Generally, cooperatives are limited to counties or regions. They may be big or small.

An article that describes a cooperative prescribed burning organization in California can be found at www.forestsandrangelands.gov/success/documents/06_ca_usfwls_coop_prescribed_protects_hfr.pdf.

How might a prescribed fire cooperative work in Alabama? One place to start of course is neighbor with neighbor. There are cases where folks interested in hunting certain land assist the landowner with prescribed burning. There is a case of a college professor who invites colleagues and graduate students to his land for a burn followed by a cookout (similar to an old-time barn-raising). Landowner associations such as county forestry planning committees, Alabama TREASURE Forest Association county committees, Alabama Forest Owners Association groups, Alabama Forestry Association landowner groups, Alabama Wildlife Federation landowner groups, Alabama Cattleman's Association landowner groups, ALFA commodity landowner groups, and others could form prescribed burning cooperatives in communities. In many cases, the members of these organizations are the same people. A lot of them have common land management objectives and goals. They may be from different backgrounds and socio-economic groups, but they have a common interest in being good stewards of their land.

It usually takes two to three people to pull off a safe, effective prescribed burn on a properly prepared site. It doesn't take a lot; sometimes the more the merrier, as long as everyone is safety conscious. Consider burning your tract at the same time your neighbor plans to burn the adjoining property.

Take the Alabama Certified Prescribed Burn Manager Certification course. If you need help, contact the Alabama Prescribed Fire Council at www.alpfc.org, the Alabama Forestry Commission at www.forestry.alabama.gov, the Alabama Wildlife Federation at www.alabamawildlife.org, your Alabama Forestry Commission county forester, your Alabama Department of Conservation & Natural Resources wildlife biologist, or your Natural Resources Conservation Service agent. 📍

Alabama law expressly states that "Prescribed Burning is a landowner property right and a land management tool that benefits the safety of the public, the environment, the natural resources, and the economy of Alabama." [Section 9-13-271(a)] ”

