

# PRESCRIBED BURNING ASSOCIATIONS: LANDOWNERS EFFECTIVELY APPLYING FIRE TO THE LAND

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## ABSTRACT

Land managers in Oklahoma usually give four reasons why they do not burn when asked about conducting prescribed fires: 1) liability, 2) lack of training, 3) not enough equipment, and 4) insufficient labor. Through the formation of local prescribed burning associations, private landowners in Oklahoma are able to overcome these barriers, and safely and effectively apply fire to their land. These associations are started by involving interested citizens from the surrounding community and allowing local cooperative extension and conservation district employees to provide technical assistance to the group. The association elects officers, and sets goals and guidelines, along with an area to work in. One of the main attributes of a prescribed burning association is its neighbor-helping-neighbor approach. Currently, there are 16 burn associations in Oklahoma, covering 30 counties, with >300 members. In spring 2008, six of these associations safely burned nearly 20,000 ha.

*Keywords:* fire education, outreach, prescribed burning associations, prescribed fire, private land, Oklahoma.

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest challenges facing private landowners in Oklahoma today is applying fire to the landscape. This is because landowners feel overwhelmed with the safe application of prescribed fire. Also, many landowners are waiting for someone to burn for them. With the limited number of contract burners, there is only a restricted amount of land that actually gets burned each year. The only way enough land will ever get burned to make an impact across the region is for landowners to burn their own property.

Landowners in Oklahoma and Texas stated the following factors reduced or restricted their use of prescribed fire: liability, experience, labor, and equipment (McNeill 2003, Weir and Bidwell 2005, Kreuter et al. 2008). In Florida and other southeastern states, liability can be managed through state statutes addressing prescribed burning (Brenner and Wade 1992). But in most states landowners do not have this legal luxury and can only manage liability exposure through insurance (Stanton 1995). To gain experience and training, land managers can attend prescribed burning workshops put on by university extension or other state and federal agencies. Attending workshops that cover only book material does not provide the necessary hands-on experience essential for successful burning. As for the labor and equipment issue, landowners should be able to go out and hire additional people and purchase whatever equipment is needed. Unfortunately, this practice makes burning costly, and many times the landowners only have small landholdings in need of prescribed burning.

Prescribed burning associations offer a solution to landowners in overcoming the challenges inherently associated with burning (McNeill 2003, Taylor 2005, Weir and Bidwell

2005). Through a prescribed burn association, landowners can better manage their liability risk by simultaneously addressing and improving their experience, labor, and equipment concerns. For example, association members can attend workshops or trainings, but they also attend actual prescribed fires. By doing this they gain experience and confidence in using prescribed fire. Members do not have to hire expensive labor because there is now an arrangement where neighbor helps neighbor. And finally, when landowners pool their equipment, it helps reduce costs and risk by having more equipment on hand. Probably the largest risk management factor is that as neighbors burn with neighbors, they begin to understand the risks and benefits associated with prescribed burning. It may even get to the point that if a fire escapes onto the neighbor's property, they are not upset and their response may well be, "That's all right, I was planning on burning that anyway."

## STARTING A PRESCRIBED BURN ASSOCIATION

The first step to starting a prescribed burn association in a local community is to assemble a group of like-minded citizens, such as landowners and lessees, as well as personnel from county cooperative extension, state and federal land management agencies, and local fire departments. For the association to be effective it has to be a grassroots program with local people in charge. It is important to have technical assistance and guidance from agency and or cooperative extension personnel, but the association will not prosper unless someone from the community takes a leadership role. The burn association is like any other organization; members only get out of it what they put into it. Once the association has formed, it should elect officers, set goals, and establish an area to work in.

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Guidelines for Prescribed Burn Associations

The following set of guidelines for prescribed burn associations has been compiled from the various associations that are active in Oklahoma (Weir and Bidwell 2005). These guidelines can be modified to fit an association’s needs. Guidelines help describe what is expected from members and what members should expect from the association.

- Elect officers: President, Vice-President, and Secretary/Treasurer; approve fire plans and address needs of association (note: officers should be landowner/lessees only; agency/university personnel should only provide technical assistance)
- Board of Directors: If multiple counties or areas are involved, one or two from each county or area; approves fire plans and addresses needs from each county (landowner/lessees only)
- Dues: \$25.00/year; used to buy equipment
- Annual Fire Training School: Topics to include—safety, equipment use, techniques
- Fire plans: Required on all burns, prepared by landholder with assistance from agency or extension personnel
- Liability: Landholder assumes liability for fire and must show proof of insurance before burn

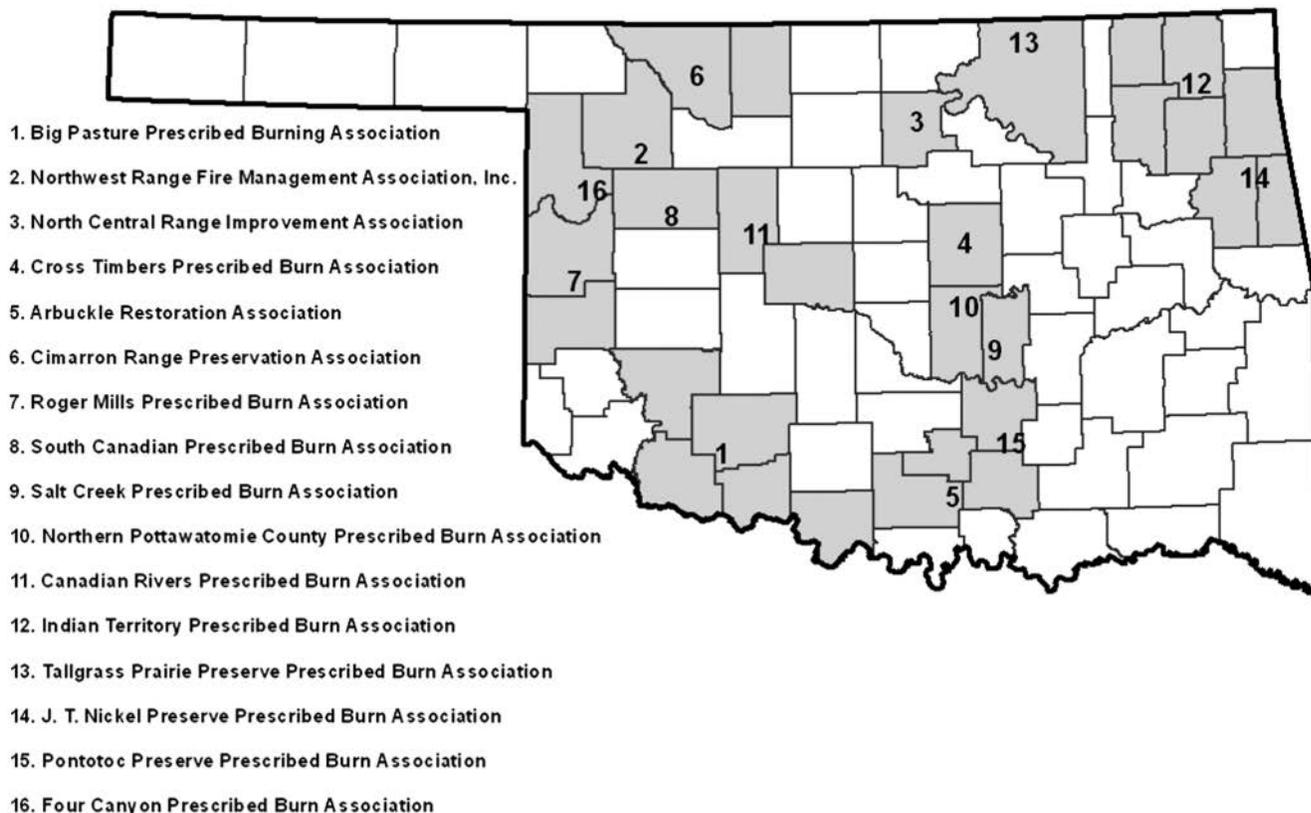
- Firebreaks: Landholder responsible for preparing proper and adequate firebreaks
- Personnel on burn: Set a minimum number that must be present on each burn
- Equipment: Have an inventory of what is available
- Burn participation: Once the association is established, members must assist with a certain number of burns before their own land is burned

It is important for the association to have a set of goals to work toward. The following goals are from the Edwards Plateau Prescribed Burning Association, Inc. located in Sonora, Texas: share equipment, share labor, train our membership, and foster good relations between neighbors and within the community in regards to the use of prescribed fire (Taylor 2005). Several other associations have adopted these exact same goals because they exemplify the true meaning of the organization.

**BENEFITS OF PRESCRIBED BURN ASSOCIATIONS**

There are numerous benefits derived from the formation of a burn association, in addition to the application of

**Oklahoma's Prescribed Burning Associations**



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Figure 1. Locations of prescribed burning associations in Oklahoma. During spring 2008, six of these associations conducted 78 burns on nearly 20,000 ha.

prescribed fire to the land. During the spring 2008 burn season in Oklahoma, six prescribed burn associations conducted 78 burns (range 8–30) on 19,975 ha (range 248–11,046 ha). These burns were conducted by associations that have membership ranging from 25 to 55 people. Another newly formed association in Kansas burned over 4,047 ha with 25 members during its first burn season, and it was noted “that was probably more land that had been burned in that county since a large wildfire 80 years ago” (Adam Elliott, Natural Resources Conservation Service, personal communication).

The safety factor of burning as a group is also very advantageous to the associations. There have been no reports of large escaped fires and no litigation brought against members or the associations to my knowledge. If a fire does escape, it is contained very quickly due to increased personnel and equipment on site. A prime example of this is from the previously mentioned association in Kansas. Last burn season, the fire departments only responded to two reported escaped fires in their county and both of those were from landowners who did not want to be members of the association.

Several of the prescribed burning associations have been able to work with the local rural fire departments. This is an important benefit to all members involved because it is often difficult for people who set fires and people who suppress fires to see eye to eye. In many instances, the fire departments have provided both equipment and manpower for prescribed burns conducted by various associations. Some fire departments ask for donations to offset the cost and time. This partnership provides the burn association’s added equipment and manpower, while the fire departments receive training time, added income, and community service. One association in Texas has had two fire trucks donated to them from different departments to use on all of their burns (Taylor 2005). Another association in Oklahoma has become their own fire department, which has allowed them access to more equipment. In some areas, the local fire departments have started calling burn association members to bring their equipment to assist with wildfire suppression.

Another very important benefit of the burn association is their ability to provide for strength en masse. This advantage goes well beyond the neighbor-helping-neighbor aspect and reaches to the community and even state level. Cooperating and working together allows for a common goal to be

met, which increases resources for the association, along with community acceptance of an often feared and misunderstood management practice. But probably the largest benefit is the political influence a group of like-minded citizens can have on laws, policy, and public opinion.

## CONCLUSIONS

In Oklahoma there are currently 16 prescribed burn associations that cover 30 of the 77 counties within the state (Figure 1), with a membership >350. Some of these associations have been very active, while a few have conducted only a couple of burns. Their activity is very dependent upon the membership’s leadership, prescribed fire experience, and confidence, along with the amount of assistance provided from local agency or cooperative extension personnel. Several of the associations have received grants from various agencies and organizations for equipment and training, which has been a tremendous benefit.

Prescribed burning associations located in other states include Texas (11), Kansas (3), Nebraska (3), Colorado (1), and one in California that has been in existence since 1956 (Dale 1999). Prescribed burning associations are beneficial to landowners and landscapes across Oklahoma. Associations have shown that with training, experience, adequate equipment, and manpower, along with technical assistance, private landowners can safely apply prescribed fire to the land. In addition, they are training future generations in the safe and effective use of prescribed fire.

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