

STAKEHOLDER PRIORITIES FOR PRESCRIBED BURNING OF LONGLeAF PINE IN THE ONSLOW BIGHT, NORTH CAROLINA

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ABSTRACT

Longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris*) savannas and forests of the U.S. Southeast comprise one of the most endangered ecosystems in the country, largely because they have experienced altered fire regimes since European settlement. Prescribed burning is a common strategy used to restore fire regimes and conserve the plant and wildlife species that depend on longleaf. To maximize ecological effectiveness, burning should be done both to maintain remnant longleaf sites and to restore degraded sites. However, management agencies and individuals are often faced with limited resources needed to conduct burning, such as money, equipment, and personnel. The future of prescribed burning in longleaf pine ecosystems lies in balancing multiple priorities and overcoming constraints to maximize ecological benefit. Thus, I investigated the priorities for prescribed burning of longleaf pine in the Onslow Bight landscape, North Carolina. I asked: What characteristics do stakeholders use to prioritize sites for burning, and why? I conducted surveys and telephone interviews of stakeholders from various agencies in the Onslow Bight, as well as individual landowners in the landscape. My results indicate that people conducting prescribed burning give priority to sites that have been burned recently because it is easier to maintain these sites than to reintroduce fire into new sites. In addition, another high priority includes sites in the wildland–urban interface because continually burning those areas minimizes risk from wildfires to surrounding development and makes complying with smoke regulations easier. Thus, sites that are in good condition are the focus of burning in the Onslow Bight, and restoration of degraded sites may not be accomplished often in practice. This study suggests that the future of prescribed burning and restoration in the longleaf pine ecosystem depends on finding ways to overcome obstacles and place more emphasis on burning in long-unburned sites.

Keywords: limited resources, longleaf pine, partnerships, priorities, restoration, wildland–urban interface.

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