



North Carolina Prescribed Fire Council
Strategic Plan
2025-2030

Fire is crucial to North Carolina. Many of our ecosystems from mountain oaks, through Piedmont prairies, to coastal plain longleaf pine depend on fire to thrive. Fire is good for nature—improving habitat, encouraging pollinators, and ensuring survival for rare plants. Fire is good for people—removing fuel that can drive large damaging wildfires that destroy homes, businesses, and lives. Fire is also inevitable. It can happen in a controlled way under the right conditions, or it can strike suddenly under the absolute worst conditions and wreak havoc on people and nature. Choosing to put fire in the right place at the right time for the right reasons is what the N.C. Prescribed Fire Council is all about.

For millennia, North Carolina was defined by fire. Lightning strikes caused fires and rejuvenated the land; Indigenous People saw the results and began setting fires as well to improve habitat, increase food supplies, and remove wildfire risk.

Most fire was removed from the landscape in the 20th century. Today, the North Carolina Prescribed Fire Council is trying to right the wrong, working together across agencies, organizations, and communities to encourage good fire for people and nature. For more than two decades, the Council has focused on bringing good fire back to North Carolina.

Anyone is welcome to join the Fire Council. Our members come from across the state and with diverse backgrounds—government agencies, nonprofits, academics, landowners, and other individuals who care about restoring land with fire. This Strategic Plan is our blueprint for increasing the use of prescribed burning in North Carolina. Please join us in this effort.



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Foreword

Importance of Prescribed Fire

Thousands of years of lightning strikes and burning by Native Americans have shaped North Carolina ecosystems, which require periodic fire to survive and thrive. Today prescribed fire, also known as controlled burning, reduces the naturally occurring buildup of vegetative fuels, reducing the risk and severity of wildfires and lessening the loss of life and property. Prescribed burning on forest and grasslands helps to prepare sites for replanting and natural seeding, control insects and diseases, and increase forest productivity.

Prescribed burning is essential to the perpetuation, restoration, and management of many plant and animal communities. Fire consumes plant matter releasing nutrients, which increase the growth and yield of plants that provide forage and cover. Prescribed burning benefits game, non-game, and endangered species by creating and enhancing habitat as well as increasing mast.



Prescribed Fire in North Carolina

Using factors such as topography, historical records, climate, plant communities, fire scars, and soils, Western scientists have mapped out fire regimes for the southeastern United States prior to colonization. They indicate that the majority of North Carolina burned every 4-6 years with the most frequent fires of 1-3 years occurring in the Sandhills and southeastern part of the state. There are areas in the northeast and in the mountains that were burned every 7-12 years or

greater than 12 years. While the frequencies are variable, the fact is that most of our state's ecosystems evolved with fire and burned with some regularity until the mid 1900's.

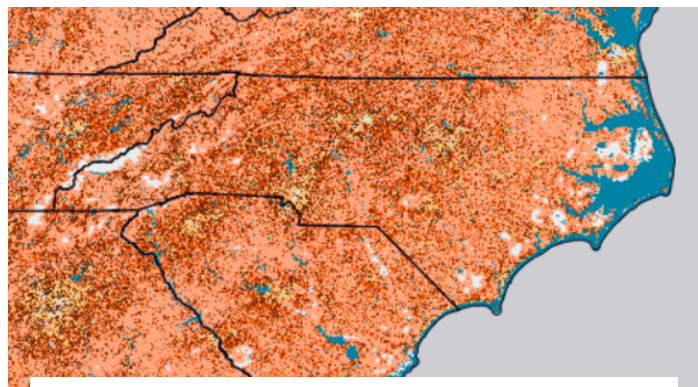
The North Carolina Forest Service's 2010 Forest Assessment reports the annual acreage of prescribed burns conducted for hazard reduction, wildlife, or silviculture purposes to be 118,000 acres. Many believe that the number is actually much greater. Better communication and data tracking will produce more precise numbers in the near future.

The forest products industry is the largest business in the state, contributing more than \$35 billion annually to the state's economy and providing more than 139,000 jobs for North Carolonians. North Carolina's forest sector accounts for \$184 million in state taxes and \$434.4 million in federal taxes. Over 60 percent of North Carolina's land is commercial forestland, capable of producing marketable timber for more than 300,000 landowners. Healthy and productive forests need fire.

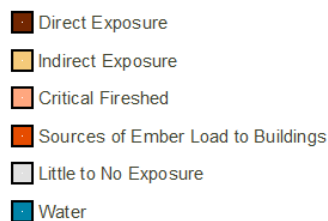
Challenges for Prescribed Fire in North Carolina

There are many challenges to conducting prescribed burns, and these challenges seem likely to become more difficult as North Carolina's population expands. North Carolina is a fast growing state, adding more residents in 2022 than any other state except Texas and Florida¹. As our population continues to grow, prescribed fire will only become more difficult to implement. Air quality and smoke management are already primary concerns for burners, and many precautions are taken to minimize impacts of smoke on nearby communities. The 2024 changes made by the Environmental Protection Agency to the National Ambient Air Quality Standards for Particulate Matter (PM NAAQS)² will make these smoke management practices even more critical to protect both public health and our ability to burn.

Rising populations are also associated with growth in the places where natural areas meet human development, often referred to as the wildland urban interface (WUI). North Carolina is fourth nationwide among states with the most homes in the WUI³. A growing WUI makes prescribed fire increasingly complicated while also raising the risk that wildfires can negatively impact human health and property.



Functional Wildland Urban Interface (WUI)



Insurance is also an increasingly significant challenge to prescribed fire implementation. While North Carolina's gross negligence legislation for prescribed fire and smoke (the passage of which the NC PFC supported in 2023) offers significant protection to burners, private contractors and non-governmental organizations in particular often still need insurance coverage. These policies are increasingly expensive and difficult to access nationwide due to the complexities of the insurance business.

Public agencies are not limited by insurance, but along with all burners face challenges related to weather and having the people and resources needed to conduct burns when the weather is within burn parameters. Anthropogenic climate change is shifting the availability of burn

¹ <https://www.osbm.nc.gov/blog/2023/12/20/north-carolinas-strong-population-growth-continues>

²

<https://www.epa.gov/pm-pollution/final-reconsideration-national-ambient-air-quality-standards-particulate-matter-pm>

³ <https://www.usfa.fema.gov/wui/what-is-the-wui.html>

windows⁴. In North Carolina and the Southeast, the overall prediction for the next fifty years is a warmer and drier climate, with an increased likelihood for more extreme events (e.g. hot spells of longer duration, severe storms, etc), contributing to challenges finding sufficient burn windows. Climate change is also causing wildfires to become larger and more frequent, further straining a workforce that often both fights wildfires and lights prescribed burns.

Finally, workforce capacity and wellbeing is an ongoing challenge. Federal investments have boosted resources available to support prescribed fire and wildfire resilience, however those investments are often concentrated in specific areas. There is an ongoing need for more capacity to conduct prescribed fire, as well as a need to diversify our workforce to make it welcoming for all people in a way it has not always been. This includes an urgent need to address the harmful legacies of colonization and slavery, particularly by better supporting Tribes and Indigenous People in connecting to and implementing their cultural fire practices.

While the challenges facing prescribed fire are many, we are confident that the best path forward is one where we work together as a united prescribed fire community. The Prescribed Fire Council looks forward to being a core part as we work to build our fire future.

History & Mission of the North Carolina Prescribed Fire Council

The Council began with periodic meetings of representatives of a few natural resource agencies and organizations in 2002. The informal group named itself the Prescribed Fire Team and its original focus was to accomplish more burning on private lands. In 2006 The North Carolina Prescribed Fire Council, patterned after existing councils in other states, was formally established with a charter, bylaws, mission statement, and an organizational structure. In 2010 the Council incorporated as a nonprofit, exempt from federal income tax under section 501(c)(3) of the IRS code. The Council is qualified to receive tax deductible bequests, charitable contributions and gifts. The strength of the Council has always been in its diversity including leadership from government agencies, nonprofits, academics, private consultants, landowners and other individuals.



The Council promotes and advocates for prescribed fire as well as to improve our professional expertise as prescribed burners. The Council has identified public education as the area of greatest need and most opportunity for improvement. Through education and outreach about the importance of prescribed fire, we hope to gain better public understanding and acceptance regarding the practice of prescribed burning. The Council has no regulatory authority, but as a group with conceptual and practical expertise, we can serve as liaisons and educators promoting prescribed fire.

⁴ <https://eadn-wco2-7111601.nxedge.io/wp-content/uploads/2021-1.pdf>

Accomplishments

The Council serves many roles and has accomplished many things in our nearly 20 year history. The following is a selection of (mostly recent) accomplishments since our previous strategic plan was created in 2013.

- Membership represents diverse affiliations including federal, state, and local agencies, large and small nonprofit organizations, community groups, landowners, and private contractors. As of June 2024, there are 304 members of the NC Prescribed Fire Council, with 110 of those being Lifetime members.
- Worked with the North Carolina Forestry Association and other partners to support the passage of gross negligence for prescribed fire and smoke in 2023.
- Financially supported projects including:
 - NC Prescribed Fire Needs Assessment
 - Supplies to support the 2023 Women in Prescribed Fire Training Exchange
 - Scholarships for members to attend events including the NC PFC Annual Meeting
 - Supplies, food, and other support for training events such as a Basic Fire Weather Course for Landowners, Certified Burner Courses, Fire Learning and Mitigation Education (FLAME) Week, and various Prescribed Burn Association events
 - 2019 Advanced Growing Season Prescribed Fire Workshop
- Developed and launched an updated website.
- Held an annual meeting every year, including two virtual meetings throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Presented awards including NC Prescribed Burner of the Year every year since 2007 to recognize individuals and teams advancing prescribed fire across the state.
- NC PFC President represents private burners and other Council interested on the NC Fire Environment Committee.
- Exhibited at and otherwise supported education and outreach events like Fire in the Pines, Party for the Pine, and the Lake James Fire Festival.
- Authored letters of support for member grant applications to sources such as the Longleaf Landscape Stewardship Fund, America the Beautiful Challenge, and Community Wildfire Defense Grant.
- Distributed (and continues to distribute) a quarterly newsletter for members.

Our Vision: What This Document Shares

This Strategic Plan provides a clear and concise direction for the Council and lays the foundation for our future. ***Our vision for the next five years is one that protects the right to burn, encourages the safe use of prescribed fire, and promotes the public's understanding of prescribed fire.*** Each goal helps provide a focus for the executive board, committees, the Council membership, and the prescribed fire community as a whole. Specific objectives under each goal will help to focus limited funds on priority areas. Council members can see what priority areas are being targeted.

Goals & Objectives for Attaining the Vision

Each goal represents a benchmark for which to strive by the year 2029. Objectives for each goal reflect more specific work to be accomplished in the next five years in order to make progress toward that goal. Each goal has an assigned committee, within the Council, that will take the lead toward achieving the objectives. Committees will give periodic progress reports to the Council Executive Board. Adjustments or amendments to the plan can be made annually. The Council President will give an update to the membership at each annual meeting.

Our Mission is to foster cooperation among all parties in North Carolina with an interest or stake in prescribed fire.



Goals & Objectives for Achieving Our Vision

1. Evaluate training needs and promote training opportunities emphasize safety, to promote best management practices, and maintain the credibility and professionalism of practitioners.
 - **Objective:** Build and maintain relationships with organizations providing prescribed fire, safety and land management training and certification such as the Society of American Foresters, North Carolina Forest Service, North Carolina State University, Southern Fire Exchange, and the Consortium for Appalachian Fire Managers and Scientists. Share information on lessons learned through the

Annual Meeting, email listserv, website and quarterly Prescribed Fire Council newsletter.

- **Objective:** Uphold and implement the North Carolina Prescribed Fire council standard code of ethics for all prescribed fire practitioners.
- **Objective:** Promote resources including the RX Fire Guidebook by UGA to increase the use of safe and effective practices in controlled burning on private lands.
- **Objective:** Support and assist with administering, instructing, and hosting basic, intermediate, and advanced prescribed fire, fire weather and fire behavior courses. This includes but is not limited to:
 - S130 Firefighting Training (Annually)
 - S190 Introduction to Wildland Fire Behavior (Annually)
 - S290 Intermediate Wildland Fire Behavior training (Annually)
 - Prescribed Burn School (Certified Burner) (Annually)
 - Smoke Management Courses
 - Public Speaking – Information Officer
 - Annual Refresher Training
 - S-219 Firing Operations
 - Landowner Workshops
 - Clearing House of Training Courses – Website & Newsletter
 - Certified Burner Continuing Education

2. Implement a targeted Communication and Education campaign that increases public support, understanding, and acceptance of prescribed fire in North Carolina.

- **Objective:** Provide information on the benefits and history of fire to the media, the public and other audiences annually in all three regions of the state, in coordination with agency Public Information Officers when possible. This could include:
 - Fire festivals
 - Prescribed fire demonstrations
 - Webinars
 - Media stories
 - Public facing infographics and other resources
- **Objective:** Adapt national and regional communication campaigns for North Carolina audiences in coordination with agency Public Information Officers.
- **Objective:** Manage and coordinate prescribed fire awareness activities, potentially including Prescribed Fire Month as useful. Target groups with specific and coordinated messages.

- **Objective:** Work with colleges and universities to support fire ecology, fire science, and fire use curricula, training, and career pathways for fire professionals of all backgrounds

3. Promote the mission and vision of the Council through partnerships.

- **Objective:** Build and enhance relationships with non-traditional, historically excluded groups, and less involved partners to foster mutual benefits and cooperation. This could include:
 - Tribal partners
 - Roanoke Electric African American Land Retention Program
 - NC APA – Planners
 - North Carolina Association of Environmental Professionals
 - North Carolina Department of Transportation
 - Power Companies
 - Voluntary Ag Districts
 - Environmental Protection Agency and other air regulatory agencies
 - NC Fire Marshals & Fire Marshals Association
 - Volunteer Fire Department Associations
 - Association of Consulting Foresters
 - Garden Clubs
 - Master Gardeners
 - Insurance companies
 - Private landowners
 - NC Climate Office
 - National Weather Service

4. Acquire resources to promote, support, and sustain the mission and goals of the Council.

- **Objective:** Develop and maintain an annual budget to support basic Council operations.
- **Objective:** Identify and pursue sources of funding for implementation of the Council's strategic plan.
- **Objective:** Identify and share information about funding sources to support prescribed burning implementation and related activities regularly with Council members through newsletters and website.

5. Take a strategic and proactive role in policies that positively impact prescribed fire in North Carolina.

- **Objective:** Work cooperatively with North Carolina Forest Service and Division of Air Quality on revisions of burn laws and smoke management plans. Advocate for burning under best management practices. Advocate for policies that allow incident commanders to manage wildfires to burn for resource benefit when this can be done with minimal negative impacts to people. Explore the addition of continuing education criteria for certified burners.
- **Objective:** Identify policy opportunities and barriers to the use of prescribed fire on public and private lands. Explore the expansion of or highlight the use of prescribed fire in the Voluntary Agriculture Districts.
- **Objective:** Provide comments on behalf of practitioners to regulators and policy makers on issues related to prescribed fire.
- **Objective:** Serve as a vehicle to find common solutions and mediate conflict with other entities with a stake in prescribed fire and land management.
- **Objective:** Work with insurance providers, prescribed burners, and other stakeholders to increase the availability of prescribed fire insurance.

6. Promote prescribed fire as a high priority for public and private lands in North Carolina.

- **Objective:** Build a community and network of prescribed fire practitioners and interested parties by hosting Annual Meetings and other gatherings and sharing information through the email listserv and website.
- **Objective:** Lead the annual Prescribed Fire Awareness Month to include a Governor's proclamation, outreach events, and positive media coverage in all the regions of the state.
- **Objective:** Reach out to state legislators to ensure their understanding and support of the role of fire using outreach events, meetings, etc. Invite legislators to events during the year, in particular those where there will be live fire when possible. Encourage the increase of state funds directed to the use of prescribed fire.
- **Objective:** Encourage agencies to provide sufficient and continuous resources to hire and train new prescribed fire personnel and reflect the high priority of prescribed fire in managers' performance standards. Develop a process for Council leadership to meet annually with agency leads about the importance of prescribed burning and the critical role the agencies play in conducting prescribed burns.
- **Objective:** Work with existing organizations such as Prescribed Burn Associations to provide funding, resources, information, and support to private landowners currently conducting prescribed fire or interested in doing so.

- Objective: Support interagency collaboration and burning across boundaries. This could include supporting multi-party MOUs, burn teams and agreements.

7. Increase research and delivery of the science and application of prescribed fire that will benefit land managers and landowners.

- Objective: Encourage practitioners to provide input on research needs through the Joint Fire Program research request to consortia covering North Carolina, Consortium for Appalachian Fire Managers and Scientists (CAFMS), and Southern Fire Exchange (SFE).
- Objective: Foster exchange of research findings among universities, scientists, and managers at the annual Council meeting, forestry education series, and field trips with researchers and practitioners. Support the SFE and CAFMS to develop a list of appropriate and vital research projects.
- Objective: Expedite the transfer of new prescribed fire technology and science to field practitioners. Demonstrate and make available the latest technology such as those that model and track smoke plumes and monitor visibility in smoke sensitive areas. Provide links to other research data pages (SFE, CAFMS, etc).
- Objective: Improve and increase available spatial and tabular data on past fire activity (prescribed and wild) across North Carolina. Use data to inform stakeholders, answer questions, and identify areas in need of prescribed fire.

Contributors

The North Carolina Prescribed Fire Council would like to particularly thank the following individuals and organizations for their valuable insights and contributions:

- Long-time NC PFC members and leaders including John Ann Shearer, Scott Pohlman, Bruce White, and Susan Miller for building the Council during our earlier days, sharing their institutional knowledge, and being committed partners in advancing prescribed fire.
- NC PFC Board and committee members 2022-2024 for writing, editing, and providing input on this plan, particularly Jennifer Fawcett for initiating the revision of this plan following the upheaval associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.
- NC PFC Board President Dakota Wagner (2024-2025) for spearheading the graphic design and layout of the final plan.

For More Information:

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