

Northeast Regional Prescribed Fire Councils Survey Results

I. SUMMARY

The Northeast Regional Prescribed Fire Council Coordinating Group (NERPFCCG) developed a survey to sense the needs and priorities of the 10 existing Prescribed Fire Councils in the 20 state Northeast region. On Oct 5th 2020 - the NERPFCCG met to discuss the responses and discuss a path forward toward an implementation strategy at the regional and national scales that would support individual Council needs and inform a unified approach to supporting councils and putting more prescribed fire on the ground.

The following section outlines survey discussion points and recommendations by the NERPFCCG for moving various items forward that would benefit the Council community. Our goal is to enable growth and further development of current and new councils, and identify priorities and needs in common at regional and national scale.

The following is a summary of survey findings that converged across councils as concerns or needs. Each issue category is addressed below with potential recommendations that could be addressed at a regional or national level.

Council Administration:

- Most Councils are ad hoc
- Not enough time to carry out Council activities
- A few key people do the bulk of the work, staff turnover jeopardizes consistency
- Getting new members is a concern
- Mix of agency versus non-agency is not consistent, and sometimes creates friction

Council Funding:

- Funding is an issue noted by many Councils
- One Council specifically mentioned that charging membership fees has helped
- A paid staff member is critical to helping with consistency of Council activities

Liability, Legislation:

- Mentioned repeatedly as a concern, either for liability to Council, or general liability and insurance within that State for (non-agency) practitioners

Risk Management:

- One Council noted that the state fire management agency is risk adverse, which translates into lack of support for RX fire in State, permits, etc.
- MOU's could help with some risk issues

Fire Needs Assessments (FNA) and RX Fire Priority Setting:

- RX fire is not always seen as the biggest fire priority, or a priority at all
- Many Councils request assistance on conducting FNA's, see that as way to help prioritize RX fire projects

- Three States have FNA's already as useful products

Fire Training and Qualification Standards

- NWCG versus non-NWCG is a (big) issue
- Acceptance of different standards is a (big) issue
- Being part of a community of fire practitioners, whether agency or non-agency
- Focus on getting RX fire seen as a priority equal to wildfire

State Certified Burn Programs

- Seen as one way to get acceptance of different fire standards and possibly reduced liability/ risk/ insurance
- Some States have an active program, some have a paper program, some Councils want help to establish a certified burner program

Education, Outreach, Communication needs

- Almost all Councils listed challenges with education and communication at some level, and need for support at regional level
- Change people's behavior rather than just knowledge
- Education/ communication needs run the range of:
 - Workshops
 - Policy
 - Public
 - Private landowners
 - Contractors
 - Organizations
 - Agencies
 - Regional and council Cooperative messaging on the benefits of RX fire

II. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these survey findings, the NERPFCCG has developed the following recommended actions for each category of issue topics:

ISSUE A: Council administration and Council funding:

The group confirmed that a regional prescribed fire council position would help develop guidance across NE state councils that would allow adoption of similar governance and financial development. This could also be a conduit for training development in coordination with efforts spearheaded by the NE RSC Prescribed Fire Working Group. A regional coordinator in the West, Southeast and Northeast would allow a coordination and communication point for regional and national prescribed council priorities and support of the many missions identified below to enable prescribed fire management. Having a supporting staff that coordinated among regions and identified common needs across councils would make communication more effective from state council to the national board but would also allow common solutions to be shared and distributed and allow a more unified approach.

These positions would circulate council information on organization/by laws, financial, leadership recruitment, training, and educational resources. This would pull councils together in a cohesive way regionally and help them communicate with each other and advocate for unique needs within the NE region. These positions would allow adoption of prescribed fire council best practices and assist in being a clearing house for basic management guidance and educational resources. They would cultivate educational resources unique to NE and locate relevant resources and solutions developed in other regions.

RECOMMENDATION: Coalition of Prescribed Fire Councils hire a regional coordinator to provide support to prescribed fire councils.

ISSUE B. Liability, Legislation, Risk Management, Fire Needs Assessments (FNA) and RX Fire Priority Setting:

Each state in the NE has various state statutes pertaining to prescribed fire from none to gross liability coverage for prescribed fire management. The National Coalition, with regional emphasis, needs to develop guidance of how to structure statutes with the possibility of tying them to training requirements and metrics for liability. Examples and successful efforts in other states that demonstrate need, development of stake holders, state agencies and proposed legislation as guidance for other states to develop their own statutes. The goal here is to promote legislation in each state outlines liability protection and training certification standards that are consistent across the NE states.

As the regional Northeast Quantitative Wildfire Risk Assessment (QWRA) is completed in the near future, there will be a realization that private citizens and landowners own much of the landscape in need of fire management, and that prescribed fire laws and statutes may need to be developed or revised. The Coalition at the regional and national level needs to advocate for standard liability laws across states and needs to develop foundational guidance and best practices. Attention needs to be paid to avoid duplicated effort in needs assessments. Once the QWRA revision is complete, prescribed fire councils will have supporting documentation needed to engage with state forestry agencies and commissions with the tools to push legislation forward. Demonstrating need in terms of addressing potential wildfire risk and other critical objectives is the first step to further enabling greater latitude to address the problem of liability, legislation and how to manage that risk.

A robust monitoring program that documents wildland fire events is needed and currently tools are being developed to track the impact and extent of prescribed fire that is being practiced. This is essential information that feeds back into the questions of liability, legislation and risk management as the community creates standards of practice and polices itself to demonstrate need, mitigation of risk and compliance.

RECOMMENDATION: Upon completion of the Northeast Quantitative Wildfire Risk Assessment (QWRA), develop regional guidance for prescribed fire councils to facilitate grass root movement toward legislation and liability coverage based on training standards.

ISSUE C: Fire Training and Qualification Standards, State Certified Burn Programs

The issue of qualifications, standard, and certifications is likely one of the largest issues facing the prescribed fire community and it is not unique to the NE - it is a national problem. The result is that prescribed fire resources are fractured by federal, state, private standards or lack of standards limiting individual participation and impairing resources being used to execute prescribed fire across ownership. In the NE with the size of states, and also the current number of differing standards, there is an opportunity to develop guidelines or standards that could be uniformly applied/adopted across multiple states. This could be a national initiative to approach NWCG with adoption of standards that do not have wildfire response requirements in task books. This would then be applied as a federal standard that could be adopted by the states but would have a separate track that could allow private and consultant interests to attain state accepted qualifications. An issue with NWCG standards and the standard of a burn boss type 2 (RXB2) is that it is embedded in a system that can take 5-10 years in the federal system to achieve RXB2. There needs to be a national focus on training with further standardization and development of a tiered set of qualifications from federal to private landowner/consultants interest in executing prescribed fire on the ground. It needs to be flexible yet not overly onerous so that all can participate in utilizing prescribed fire as a management tool.

As things currently stand, some states are building restrictive prescribed fire programs where the only latitude to practice prescribed fire is given to State or Federal employees that have NWCG qualifications. This does not allow private citizens, consultants and landowners to mitigate their own hazardous fuel loads. Due to this situation, at least two tracks of certification are needed with standards adopted consistently across states to unify the prescribed fire practitioner community (this is addressed in more detail below).

Once the regional and state prescribed fire needs assessments are complete, it will be evident that the private sector will have the majority of the landscape in need of treatment. If these standards or qualifications are developed and adopted, they could then be tied to liability legislation or statute that would allow greater latitude for proactive fire management. There are suggestions and standards that have been adopted (NH guide, MI point system) that could be applied as a standard. What is needed is a collection of all stakeholders to convene and develop some potential solutions to standards and certifications. This could be a regional objective and would likely be more constructive at this scale to develop guidelines to address this issue.

RECOMMENDATION: Develop a stakeholder group to create a tiered system of qualifications and certifications so that prescribed fire resources can work across landscapes and organizational structures from Federal to Private interest.

ISSUE D: Education, Outreach, Communication needs

There are several efforts in the works to help push forward new messages around prescribed fire management from states to national messages. It was thought that these messages needed to be collected and structured so they could be used across different localities or modified and adapted to local conditions. It was considered that this could be a role for the regional prescribed fire council leads or could be a national position that catalogued and assisted in distributing and holding this information in a common catalogue. This would allow messaging to be more consistent and as groups generate publications or resources, there would be a

common place to house them. Another thought is the JFSP regional fire science exchanges could provide this service and expand the coverage with additional resource. This would diversify their resources from peer reviewed literature to more messaging which might not be a capability.

RECOMMENDATION: Additional responsibility of regional coordinators or a national position to organize and distribute educational materials and public education efforts.
