



United States
Department of
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Putting Fire To Work in Your Alabama Woodlands

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What is Prescribed Burning, and Why Should I Consider it for My Woodlands?

Lightning-caused wildfire is natural. It is part of the ecosystem. And it is inevitable. Careless use of fire and other human-caused factors can also cause wildfires any time of the year. As we have been taught about our woods, “it is not *if* they will burn, but *when* they will burn.” Therefore, we need to prepare our woodlands for the inevitable. But, did you know that some fires are in fact good, and could actually mitigate the catastrophic damage that a wildfire could cause?

Prescribed burning, also known as controlled burning, is the deliberate use of fire by experienced practitioners under specified and controlled conditions to achieve a specific land management goal.

It is a safe way to apply a natural process, ensure ecosystem health, and reduce wildfire risk.



Landowners learn how to conduct a prescribed burn for site preparation during a landowner field day in North Carolina. Photo credit: Jennifer Evans

Most wildfires that burn into areas where prescribed burning has recently occurred cause less damage and are easier to control. This is because the flammable plants and other fuels have already been reduced by previous fire. By safely reducing excessive amounts of duff, brush, and shrubs, prescribed burning is the most practical and cost-efficient way to reduce dangerous accumulations of combustible fuels under southern pine stands. It is one of the most effective tools that we have in preventing the dangers and spread of wildfires.

In addition to wildfire hazard reduction, prescribed fire can be used to reach other land management objectives, such as controlling hardwoods and other competing vegetation in pine stands. Shade-tolerant hardwoods of low value and poor quality often encroach upon the land that is best suited for growing pine. Unwanted species may crowd out or suppress pine seedlings. However, through the carefully planned use of prescribed fire, the understory can be managed to limit competition.

To learn more about how good fires can protect your forest, visit www.goodfires.org.

Since prescribed fire recycles nutrients back into the soil, encourages the new growth of native vegetation, and maintains many plant species that depend on periodic fire, it is also often used to improve forage and habitat for both game and non-game wildlife species. Other management objectives for which prescribed burning can assist include site preparation (some species, such as longleaf pine, actually need bare mineral soil cleared by fire in order to grow and germinate), enhancing appearance and access, and controlling insects and disease. The use of prescribed fire at the appropriate scale and frequency in your woodlands can ultimately help to increase the long-term value of your land, regardless of your management objectives.

I Want Prescribed Fire on My Land...Now What?

In many states, private contractors are available for hire to install firebreaks, write a burn plan, conduct the burn, standby on a burn that you are managing, or provide general assistance. In Alabama, although you are responsible for your own due diligence in obtaining references before hiring, a list of available contractors can be found at this periodically-updated website maintained by the Alabama Forestry Commission: www.forestry.state.al.us/ServiceProvidersQuickList.aspx.



State agency personnel conducting a prescribed burn. Photo credit: Jennifer Evans

In some states, forestry agencies can help to complete these same activities. However, **if your burn must be conducted within a specific period of time** due to specifications on your Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) or other contract, it is advised to check with your state forestry agency first because there may be a waitlist. In Alabama, the Forestry Commission utilizes personnel and equipment to provide the following services for a fee: prescribed burning, fire lane construction, and creating small wildlife openings (less than 5 acres). However, this assistance is only provided when forestry consultants, contract operators, or specialized equipment are unavailable to furnish this service. More information can be found at: www.forestry.state.al.us/AFCServices.aspx?bv=1&s=7.

If you would prefer to conduct a burn on your property yourself, it is recommended that you become a Certified Prescribed Burn Manager, at a minimum. In Alabama, the Forestry Commission has developed requirements to become a Certified Prescribed Burn Manager, which, for those new to burning, includes the successful completion of a 32-hour course and exam. The course is open to forest landowners, foresters, wildlife biologists, consultants, contractors, or agency personnel who are interested in the use of prescribed fire as a management tool and who are seeking certification. It includes sessions on the legal aspects of prescribed burning, fire behavior, tactics, smoke management, environmental effects, plan preparation, safety, and more. Certified Prescribed Burn Managers have an additional level of liability protection than those who are not certified if they adhere to the regulations within the Alabama Prescribed Burning Act.

To learn more about the Alabama Certified Prescribed Burn Manager program and register for a course, visit: www.forestry.alabama.gov/BurnCourses.aspx

You can gain additional experience by assisting a neighbor with their burn, volunteering with organizations that conduct prescribed burning, or by virtually watching a landowner conduct a burn as part of a free online course offered by North Carolina State University. The course, called e-FIRE, can be accessed at www.go.ncsu.edu/efire. It allows participants to “see” how burns are conducted, and provides numerous videos and other resources to watch and read at your own pace. You can also exchange information, techniques, and experiences with other practitioners through your state’s Prescribed Fire Council. You can learn more about the Alabama Prescribed Fire Council and how to become a member by visiting their website: www.alpfc.org.

Many landowners are concerned about the liability of conducting a prescribed burn. However, Alabama is considered a “negligence” state, which means that any landowner or his/her agent who conducts a prescribed burn in compliance with the law **will not be held liable for damages or injury caused by fire or resulting smoke**, unless the damage results from negligence or improper conduct. Several insurance companies provide protection for prescribed burning, some even on a “per burn” basis for those landowners who may only burn once or twice each year. For a list of the companies who provide coverage in Southeastern states, please visit: <http://research.cnr.ncsu.edu/blogs/southeast-fire-update/insurance/>.

Although prescribed burning is one of the most cost-effective tools available to manage your land, costs associated with a prescribed burn may still be a concern. Fortunately, there are several options available through various financial assistance programs such as those with the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program to help offset the costs of conducting a burn. Payments through EQIP vary by the type of burn, if you are historically underserved, and, in Alabama, if the burn will be conducted in a high-risk area. Visit your local NRCS field office to learn more.

Contact information for your local NRCS field office can be found at: www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/contact/local/