

# Is Funding Always Worth the Cost?

by Jeffery Stackhouse<sup>1</sup> and Lenya Quinn-Davidson<sup>2</sup>

Prescribed fire is widely recognized as one of the most cost-effective and ecologically appropriate tools for reducing hazardous fuels, maintaining grasslands and woodlands, and restoring California's many frequent-fire habitats, yet its use remains limited by a long list of barriers, which have been identified over time through various studies and surveys. Through this work, funding has been identified time and again as a major impediment to prescribed fire, and we are finding through our community-based prescribed fire work in California's North Coast that although this is true, there are two disparate sides to the funding impediment. The more common narrative is that a lack of funding is limiting good work. We are finding that the opposite is also true: the seemingly involuntary focus on funding, and the many strings by which funding is attached, has the power to limit or delay good work in major ways. This article describes two potential pitfalls of prescribed fire funding, and encourages landowners and other land managers to consider the question: is funding always worth its cost?

The ideas described in this article come from our work with the Humboldt County Prescribed Burn Association, a cooperative group of landowners and community members who work together to plan and implement prescribed burns on Humboldt County's private lands. Over the last two years, the work of the HCPBA has been widely recognized as beneficial and effective, and projects have started attracted funding from various agencies and collaborators. But after this fall, when various HCPBA projects were delayed or



Explaining medusahead. Photo courtesy Lenya Quinn-Davidson

held up by funding-related issues, we're learning that funding may not always be worth the cost—not to the funder, but to the project.

**Environmental compliance:** The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), and the other compliance hurdles standing in the way of our agency partners trying to complete good fire projects become our hurdles once we accept state and federal funding. We have found that when it comes to funding, each project should be uniquely considered. It's important for the landowner and the funder to ask whether the project is big enough or complex enough to require major financial support. In many cases, a prescribed fire project in a simple fuel type (like grass or woodland) will require little to no ground disturbance during preparation, and can be implemented with minimal equipment and little cost, especially in an area with a community-based prescribed burn association. For projects like these, and even for some simple burn units in more complex fuel types, there is little incentive to enter into a contract or cost-share program with a federal or state agency that requires in-depth pre-burn environmental compliance work. It is often more efficient and cost-effective to move ahead without funding.

**Qualifications:** Qualifications are an important consideration for landowners seeking funding for their prescribed fire projects. Agencies, and even some non-governmental organizations, often require that projects meet federal standards, in the same way they would if the agency were implementing the project itself. In many cases, federal funding requires that a federally qualified Prescribed Fire Burn Boss Type 2 (RXB2) lead the burn; however, private RBX2s are in short supply, often have to travel from afar, are expensive to hire, and have busy schedules that don't allow

<sup>1</sup> University of California Cooperative Extension, Humboldt and Del Norte Counties, Eureka, CA; Livestock and Natural Resources Advisor; California Certified Rangeland Manager #113. Stackhouse is a wildlife biologist and range ecologist with research experience in a wide variety of habitats. His current research program focuses on woody encroachment of prairies and finding economically viable options for resetting late seral habitats to promote biodiversity and early seral beneficial forage plant species for livestock and wildlife. <sup>2</sup> University of California Cooperative Extension, Humboldt, Mendocino, Siskiyou, and Trinity Counties, Eureka, CA; Area Fire Advisor. Quinn-Davidson has a background in fire ecology and social science and is interested in the effects of fire suppression on biodiversity in California's fire-adapted ecosystems and in empowering Californians to bring fire back into the land management toolbox.

*continued next page*

## Is Funding Always Worth the Cost? *continued*

landowners to adapt to burn windows as needed. Likewise, depending on the size of the project, hiring an RXB2 may, in the end, cost more than the landowner receives from the funding agency. In other cases, federal funding may mean that everyone on the burn meets the federal standard for an entry-level firefighter (Firefighter Type 2), which can be a barrier to entry for the landowner and their community partners. For some complex in-season burns, these kinds of qualified leaders and crews can be critical for success; for more simple burns, or winter burns, we recommend proceeding without funding to maximize your flexibility to meet narrow weather windows and keep the options more open.

We do not fault the funding agencies, nor the landowners seeking support, but the cost of outside funds are real and need to be part of the initial conversation. The ultimate cost of funding is time. More time for planning, more time for surveys, more mitigation of risk (more unit preparation, more dozer lines, more water resources, more engines, more people, hiring of federally qualified burn bosses, etc.), more constraint of implementation timing/prescription, more stakeholders, more fear, more headache.

In Humboldt County, our agency partners—like the Natural Resources Conservation Service and CAL FIRE—have been some of our most important allies. However, the larger fire, conservation, and landowner communities need to question the default assumption that all good work requires outside funding. There is a large amount of gray area in the planning and implementation of any project. Most would agree that any amount of state funding would likely be wasted on a four-by-four burn pile project in



Project collaborators on site visits to understand burn objectives and required regulatory measures to meet environmental quality act requirements to conduct state/federal funded private land burns. Photo courtesy Lenya Quinn-Davidson

someone’s back yard. Most would also agree that a 10k acre burn should likely not only have agency funding, but also agency support and involvement. It is the middle ground that stands in question: the 20-acre grassland burn, the three to five-acre understory burn, the five slash piles or 30 hand piles. Where is the line and at what point is the cost of time, agency resources, and loss of precious burn windows not worth the per acre or per pile benefit? There are too many acres, too much fuel, too many projects, to ever miss a burn day in California. Let’s continue to collaborate and find strategic ways to deploy funding programs, knowing that not all projects require big state and federal dollars. Sometimes just a neighbor helping a neighbor, free of charge, is all you really need.



**HRS**  
HABITAT RESTORATION SCIENCES, INC.

Design-Build landscape and general engineering contractor specializing in wildland and wildlife habitat mitigation, biological monitoring and restoration

hrsrestoration.com | 916.408.2990

**DUDEK** PLAN | DESIGN | PERMIT | CONSTRUCT | MANAGE

**California Focused Environmental Planning**

- Biological Studies
- CEQA/NEPA
- Contract Planning
- Cultural Resources
- Fire Protection Planning
- Hazardous Materials
- Mitigation Monitoring
- Natural Resources Management
- Native Habitat Design/Restoration
- Water Resources Development
- Wetlands Delineation

Dudek.com | info@dudek.com | 800.450.1818