

Working with Prescribed Burn Associations

Prescribed fire is any fire that is ignited under predetermined conditions, by trained, qualified, or experienced people for specific management goals and objectives (ecological, protection, restoration, etc.) and includes pile burning and cultural burning. Native Americans were the first prescribed fire practitioners and shaped the California landscape through thousands of years of fire use. Over the last few years, California has had an increased in organizations who participate in prescribed fire, changes in state legislation and more public education surrounding prescribed fire.

Prescribed Burn Associations

Prescribed Burn Associations (PBAs) are collaborative communities open to all that share knowledge, expertise, tools and work in order to implement prescribed fire. The PBA community within California has grown over the last few years and plays an important part in re-introducing good fire back to the landscapes. They are also instrumental in keeping land management at the landowner level. Working with your local PBA can be a great way to contribute to community building, while achieving goals and objectives for yourself and other landowners.

Most PBAs operate in a similar fashion:

1. Landowner reaches out to the PBA to become a member of the PBA or request a site visit.
2. PBA can connect the landowner to any technical assistance professionals or resources that might be needed pre-burn. Examples:
 - a. Forest thinning to prepare for a burn?
 - b. PBA can identify how to prepare a unit for burning (can be as involved as creating a fuel break of some sort or as simple as cleaning 10 feet off a road – depends on the site).
 - c. Put you in contact with a Certified Burn Boss
 - d. A list of all permits needed to burn (i.e., CALFIRE Burn Permit, Air Quality Permit etc.)
3. If the landowner decides that they would like to engage with the PBA, then they work with the PBA to determine how the community can best help them successfully use prescribed fire.
4. Prior to the burn day the Landowner is responsible for:
 - a. Obtaining all permits needed - PBA can give guidance were necessary and can be onsite during agency visits to give more information.



- b. Communicating with neighbors to let them know that a prescribed burn is going to take place and to know which neighbors might have an issue with burning.
- 5. On the day of the burn
 - a. PBA:
 - i. Can bring tools, expertise, knowledge and a workforce for the day of the burn and usually a few days post burn for “mop-up” or cleanup/patrol of the burn.
 - ii. Can interface with the local volunteer fire departments or CALFIRE for assistance on the burn (NOTE: CALFIRE may assist with PBA burns as long as they do not put fire on the ground. They may perform any other task)
 - b. Landowner:
 - i. Responsible for the liability of the burn (unless a burn boss is hired)
 - ii. Ensuring neighbors and agencies have been notified.
 - iii. Typically asked to provide food for the PBA members who are working the burn
- 6. Post-burn the landowner should monitor the unit over time. Smoke will be seen for a few days to a few weeks.
- 7. Please consider making a donation to a local volunteer fire department. Especially if one came to the burn to assist.

Who Can Help You Burn?

The table below will list the organizations with pros and cons. Ultimately who you go with should be determined by who can achieve your goals and objectives in the safest manner possible.

Organization	Pro	Con
CALFIRE or Local Fire Departments	Very good for technical, complex burns – have a lot of equipment and personnel Assumes liability for the burn Provides support in outreach of burn (press releases, social media etc.). CALFIRE will prepare the burn unit control lines	CEQA environmental review is required – depending on the situation, the landowner might have to incur some of that cost. Timing of the burn might not be when you may want it for your goals and objectives since CALFIRE burns when available resources line up with proper weather conditions Project might have to align with a larger County (or Unit) project
NGOs (Non-Government Organizations)	Good for less technical or complex burns Provides a lot of support for landowners <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Help in obtaining burn permits or air quality permits o Advertisement of the burn the day of (landowner is responsible to talk with neighbors) Provides access to a Certified Burn Boss Can help liaison between landowner and agencies	Might have to wait a season for availability Landowner is responsible to burn unit preparation.

Liability

Liability laws have changed significantly in the last few years, increasing the likelihood that landowners would be willing to use fire as a management option. According to the U.S. Forest Service in 2022, 99.84% of prescribed fires go to plan, although these successes aren't usually highlighted in outreach and media. Understandably, liability is a frequently asked question with Prescribed Fire. In October 2021, [SB 332](#) was passed stating that a person would not be held liable for suppression costs if the following specific conditions were met:

- Purpose of burn is for ecological maintenance and restoration, fuel reduction, cultural burning, silviculture or agriculture
- Certified burn boss has written a burn plan
- Burn is conducted in compliance with burn plan prescription
- The burning entity has written permission from the landowner to burn
- Burn is conducted in compliance with any burn or air quality permits required



Figure 2. Prescribed fire in Douglas-fir mixed forest, May 2023. Credit: Tori Norville, UCCE Fire Advisor.

This bill does not protect a landowner from civil charges being brought against them from a neighbor or community, it only protects the landowner from having to pay suppression costs in the event of an escape.

A second bill, [SB 926](#), was passed in September of 2022, creating the pilot '[Prescribed Fire Claims Fund](#)' which became active June of 2023. This fund consists of \$20 million set aside by the State to cover certain losses (i.e. civil cases) from prescribed fires if certain criteria such as a burn plan written and signed by a Certified Burn Boss and burning within the prescription, is met (see the Prescribed Fire Claims Fund link above for more information). A Certified Burn Boss or Cultural Fire Practitioner may register a burn for up to \$2 million of the claims fund. Prescribed fire practitioners and organizations are encouraging landowners to work with Certified Burn Bosses and to apply for the Claims Fund to show the California Legislators that the fund, along with more legislation changes, are a benefit to California residents, thus allowing for the continued work with prescribed fire and increase support.

Certified Burn Boss

A certified burn boss is someone who has taken the necessary classes and trainings in order to write and sign a burn plan. In California, there are two types of certifications that qualify: the National Wildfire Coordination Group (NWCG) Certified Burn Boss – certified nationwide; or the California Certified Burn Boss – certified only for California. Currently, there is a shortage of certified burn bosses in California, however, there has been an increase in trainings throughout the State and within a few years, this shortage should not be felt as drastically as it is now. Your local Prescribed Burn Association or UCCE Advisors can put you in contact with a Certified Burn Boss from your area.

References and Resources

[California PBA](#): California's hub for Prescribed Burn Associations and community based burning.

Good resources for Planning, Training and how to connect to a PBA near you.

[CALFIRE Prescribed Fire](#)

Learn about the Prescribed Fire Claims Fund, access the California Prescribed Fire Claims Fund Online Application and CALFIRE's vegetation management program.

[UCCE Humboldt: Liability of Prescribed Fire in CA](#)

Excellent summary of Liability and Prescribed Fire in California.

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