

Prescribed Fire Certification for Wisconsin

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Introduction

This document summarizes the effort of the Wisconsin Prescribed Fire Council (WPFC) to develop criteria, procedures, and protocols for a prescribed fire certification program in Wisconsin.

Starting in August 2021, a committee representing a diversity of prescribed fire interests - including agencies, non-profit organizations, contractors, volunteers, and landowners - has been working on defining the parameters of a possible certification program. This document describes the current status of our vision for certification and will be updated as our vision evolves.

Background

Prescribed fire is an essential process for restoring and maintaining native ecosystems in Wisconsin. It also has a variety of other, more specific uses like creating habitats for specific species, reducing wildfire hazards and improving grass production. Prescribed burning is an established practice among all major state and federal agencies, nonprofit conservation organizations, private contractors and landowners who engage in ecosystem restoration and management in the state.

The Wisconsin Prescribed Fire Council (WPFC) strives to make the use of prescribed fire in Wisconsin safer, more effective, and more accepted for all practitioners, and to maximize our ability to burn more fire-adapted landscapes safely and effectively.

The need to increase the number of acres annually treated with prescribed fire is paramount for WPFC. The 2016 Fire Needs Assessment estimated that nearly 4.5 million acres in Wisconsin, including public and private lands, would benefit from fire management, and that up to one million acres would need to be burned annually to maintain our fire-dependent ecosystems. Currently, 30,000 to 50,000 acres are burned annually by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) and other organizations and individuals. The need to expand our efforts is deeply felt.

Administration

One way to increase prescribed burn capacity might be to establish a program for certifying the training and experience of prescribed fire practitioners. WPFC envisions a program modeled on those in force in other states, tailored to the specific needs of Wisconsin.

Nearly all other states that currently implement a prescribed fire certification program do so through their forest management agencies. We anticipate that a similar program would be administered by WDNR, as the agency that is responsible for managing wildland fire in Wisconsin. For a successful certification program, consistent funding for administration will be needed.

We envision that, in Wisconsin, a certification program would certify practitioners at the Burn Boss level. A Burn Boss is the individual who leads the planning, implementation and full extinguishing of a broadcast prescribed fire, including all phases of permitting, planning, preparation, operations, safety, mop-up, post-burn monitoring and evaluation. Certification is intended for those people leading burns on multiple units in multiple parcels each year, as opposed to those leading only a few simple burns, primarily on their own land, each year.

Qualifications

The training and experience requirements for certification should be similar to those recommended for Burn Bosses in the WPFC document “[Recommended Qualifications for Prescribed Fire Personnel](#)”, November 2020. While burn bosses should be qualified at the Crew Member and Line Boss levels, certification will only apply at the Burn Boss level.

Terminology

We have not determined what the certified burn practitioner would be called. Most states refer to the certified individual as a "certified prescribed burn manager". Apparently that term has been selected to avoid confusion with NWCG-qualified burn bosses. Prescribed Fire Manager is an NWCG position, however, who manages prescribed fire Burn Bosses and resources. Our qualifications document defines the individual leading a burn as a Burn Boss, consistent with the prevalent terminology for prescribed burn leaders in Wisconsin. We have decided that, for now, whichever term we select will need a clear definition.

Privileges for Certified Burn Bosses

The certification program would provide opportunities for individuals who meet a defined standard of training and experience. The program would include a training component to prepare individuals to be certified. The level of training and experience required, as well as the privileges offered, are still to be determined. However, other states' programs provide privileges similar to the following:

- access to training opportunities, particularly leadership training opportunities
- fewer restrictions on special burn permits in the Intensive and Extensive enforcement areas
- permission to burn afforded when non-certified individuals are not allowed to burn
- improved access to prescribed fire insurance.
- allowance to leave a fire when it is "controlled" rather than "extinguished"*
- liability determined by a "gross negligence" rather than "strict liability" standard*

*Note that the last two bullet points above would require changes to current Wisconsin law to be implemented. A change in law would also be required to implement a certification program that is state-funded or administered by the WDNR.

Benefits to Wisconsin Resources

A certification program could potentially provide multiple benefits that would collectively increase the number of acres treated by prescribed fire, by:

- Increasing the number of qualified prescribed burners in Wisconsin, by providing training and incentives to become certified
- Improving the qualifications of the applicant pool for natural resources jobs, in the public, private, and non-profit sectors
- Allowing certified prescribed burners to complete burns more efficiently by modifying the requirement to ‘completely extinguish’ all fires before leaving them
- Increasing the overall competence of prescribed burners in the state and thereby reducing wildfire risk
- Contributing to the growth of prescribed burn businesses
- Providing greater flexibility for WDNR to partner with certified prescribed burners to increase the number of burns conducted on public lands
- Certification standard helps rangers writing permits to assess the capabilities of permit applicants

- Certification program offers a framework for the next-generation permit system to handle the greatly increased numbers of permits
- A successful certification program could lead to increased visibility and legitimacy for prescribed fire in Wisconsin, as well as for the WPFC
- Reciprocity provisions could potentially benefit contractors and others working in multiple states