

Prescribed Fire Certification for Wisconsin

February 2, 2023

Introduction

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

Starting in August 2021, a group 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, tribes, 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 2015 Fire Needs Assessment ([Hmielowski et al, 2015](#)) 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, 50,000 to 75,000 acres are burned annually by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) and other agencies, organizations and individuals. The need to expand our efforts is deeply felt.

To increase our collective ability to burn more acres, we will need to increase the number of trained and experienced prescribed burn personnel. The need applies to all skill levels, but especially to leadership positions. We can increase prescribed burn capacity by establishing a program for certifying the training and experience of prescribed fire leaders, particularly those who lead burns on multiple units at multiple locations each year. WPFC envisions a program modeled on those in force in other states, tailored to the specific needs of Wisconsin. The certification program is not intended for those leading only a few simple burns, primarily on their own land, each year. WPFC expects to provide training for private landowners through other means.

Administration

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.

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.

Certified Burn Bosses would be qualified to lead burns on moderately complex units. The committee has developed a complexity analysis tool, adapted from tools used by the Nature Conservancy fire program and the National Wildfire Coordinating Group, that can be used to assess burn units and to define the level of complexity that a certified burn boss would be qualified to lead.

Certification would **not** be a requirement to lead burns in Wisconsin. The current permit system would remain as-is for those who do not choose to become certified.

For certification to be successful, consistent funding for creation and maintenance of the program will be needed.

Qualifications

The training and experience requirements for certification will 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 previously qualified at the Crew Member and Line Boss levels, certification will only apply at the Burn Boss level.

The committee is currently defining the details of the training and experience requirements.

Benefits for Certified Burn Bosses

The primary incentive to become certified will be the ability to obtain a recognized credential, which can be used to demonstrate an individual's qualifications to insurers, permit authorities, potential clients, and others.

The certification program would provide a defined path for individuals to achieve certified Burn Boss status, including the necessary training.

Individuals possessing the Wisconsin Certified Prescribed Burn Boss credential would likely have easier access to prescribed burn liability insurance.

Other potential privileges, which would require changes to state law or policies to be enacted, include:

- Liability protection for certified Burn Bosses in some circumstances
- Ability to leave a fire when it is "controlled" rather than "extinguished"
- Ability to be allowed to burn when others are not

Our goal is to establish a certification program and achieve a successful track record before pursuing such changes.

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

- 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
- 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