

Prescribed Fire Certification for Wisconsin

Updated October 10, 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 target species, reducing wildfire hazards, controlling invasive species, and improving grass production for domestic grazers. 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. The council also seeks to greatly expand our ability to safely burn more fire-adapted landscapes because the current need far exceeds our ability to burn.

The need to increase the number of acres treated annually with prescribed fire is well-documented. 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 safely 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. One way to increase our leadership capacity is to establish 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 certification program modeled on those in force in other states, that is tailored to the specific needs of Wisconsin. The certification program is not intended for those leading only a few, relatively 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. The WDNR Division of Forestry, as the agency responsible for managing wildland fire in Wisconsin, is collaborating with the WPFC to establish a pilot program for training and certifying prescribed fire burn bosses. Tentatively, WDNR will staff the certification program. The WPFC will focus on establishing training and experience requirements, developing burn boss training curriculum and providing training courses.

The Wisconsin certification program will 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.

Our targets for certification training are prescribed burn leaders who burn multiple parcels in multiple locations within a year. Though private landowners may choose to become certified, they are not the intended audience.

Certification would **not** be a requirement to lead burns in Wisconsin. The current WDNR permit system would remain as-is for all prescribed burners whether they are certified or not.

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

Complexity

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

The complexity [worksheet](#), and its [Introduction and Instructions](#), are available from the [WPFC website](#).

Experience

The experience requirements for certification will be based on those recommended for Burn Bosses in the WPFC document “[Recommended Qualifications for Prescribed Fire Personnel](#)”, November 2020. Applicants must:

- Have at least three years of prescribed burn experience, in which they have participated in at least 25 prescribed burns
- Be qualified as a Line Boss, as described in the WPFC Qualification Guideline.
- Self-report their prior experience.
- Submit documentation showing that they have led at least two burns as an apprentice Burn Boss, under the supervision of at least two different qualified Burn Bosses. These burns must be at a moderate level of complexity.

Training

WPFC, in collaboration with WDNR, will develop several training courses tailored to prescribed burning in Wisconsin, that would cover the material that prospective burn bosses should know. Each of these courses would provide approximately two days of training. Tentatively, the courses would cover the following general topics:

1. Fire Behavior/Weather
2. Ignition Operations
3. Preparing a Burn Plan
4. Leading a Prescribed Burn

For applicants who are following the NWCG training track, we will accept the following courses as alternatives to the Wisconsin-based training:

1. "Introduction to Wildland Fire Behavior Calculations" (S-390)
2. "Firing Operations" (S-219)
3. "Prescribed Fire Plan Preparation" (RX-341)
4. "Prescribed Fire Implementation" (RX-301)

(The parallel NWCG training track may be revised in the future if new NWCG qualifications for prescribed fire personnel are adopted.)

Reciprocity

We will develop guidelines for accepting certifications from other states that require qualifications similar to the Wisconsin program.

WDNR staff who are currently qualified as Burn Bosses will be eligible for certification.

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 identification of the necessary training along at least two pathways – NWCG and the Wisconsin Standard.

Individuals possessing the Wisconsin Certified Prescribed Burn Boss credential would likely have easier access to prescribed burn liability insurance because insurance companies will have a clear way to ascertain that a practitioner is following industry standards.

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 strategy is to establish a certification program and achieve a successful track record before pursuing such privileges that might require legal or administrative changes.

Benefits to Wisconsin Resources

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

- Increasing the overall competence of prescribed burners in the state and thereby reducing wildfire risk.
- Improving the overall safety of prescribed burns and thereby avoiding negative feedback by the public.
- Providing greater flexibility for WDNR to partner with certified prescribed burners to increase the number of burns conducted on public lands.
- Helping WDNR forest rangers efficiently assess the capabilities of burn permit applicants.

- Increasing the number of qualified prescribed burners in Wisconsin, by expanding training opportunities and increasing incentives to become certified.
- Improving the qualifications of the applicant pool for natural resources jobs, in the public, private, and non-profit sectors.
- Contributing to the growth of prescribed burn businesses.
- Allowing contractors and others to more easily work in multiple states through reciprocity.
- Increasing the visibility and legitimacy of prescribed fire in Wisconsin.