

# Oregon Certified Burn Manager Program to Expand the Use of Prescribed Fire



## **AN OREGON CERTIFIED BURN MANAGER PROGRAM WILL ADDRESS BOTTLENECKS TO EXPANDING THE USE OF PRESCRIBED FIRE IN THE STATE**

Through my work with forest collaboratives across Oregon and Washington, it struck me that of all the different forest management actions, there was a broad consensus that there needs to be more prescribed fire on the landscape.

Prescribed fire effectively reduces hazardous fuels, restores ecological conditions across a range of landscapes, has a long history with many indigenous peoples, and supports habitat for Tribally-important flora and fauna. Other tools, such as mechanical thinning are often effective, but not as effective as

prescribed fire, and in some cases can make fire risk worse if not followed with prescribed fire because of surface fuels. Other methods cost more on a large scale, and do not have the same ecological benefits as fire.



**PHOTO 1:** Steve Rondeau (Klamath Tribes Natural Resources Director). Photos 1& 2 show the effects of the Klamath Tribes restoration prescription and Forest Service prescribed fire (April 2021) after the 2021 Bootleg Fire on the Fremont-Winema National Forest. Both photos are of the same area from different perspectives.



**PHOTO 2:** Steve Rondeau (Klamath Tribes Natural Resources Director). Photos 1& 2 show the effects of the Klamath Tribes restoration prescription and Forest Service prescribed fire (April 2021) after the 2021 Bootleg Fire on the Fremont-Winema National Forest. Both photos are of the same area from different perspectives.

Despite its indispensable role in forest restoration, there are many barriers to significantly limiting the use of prescribed fire in projects.

When I joined the **Oregon Prescribed Fire Council (OPFC)** as coordinator in 2019, I was excited to tackle the barriers to implementing prescribed fire. One of the most significant barriers to burning on private land is liability. While prescribed fires rarely lead to unintended damage, concern about liability in those cases is enough to stop many landowners from engaging in the practice altogether. This is exacerbated by limited insurance market to cover losses from the rare instances when a prescribed fire escapes. OPFC spent years examining programs in other states and learning about how liability protections are usually paired with training standards, typically called a Certified Burn Manager (CBM) program.

Now, an Oregon CBM program is coming to fruition. Governor Brown's comprehensive Wildfire bill, **SB 762**, incorporated its creation and passed in June (or whatever the month was).



***PHOTO:** Amanda Rau*

A CBM Program will create formal training and accreditation for professionals and motivated landowners who plan and implement prescribed burns. This is widely used in other states to support prescribed fire. By having a formally recognized and clearly defined state curriculum, all parties will understand what due diligence means for mitigating risks. The training will also create a clear path for people interested in a career as a CBM, expanding the workforce and increasing options available for landowners.

Being a CBM will not require conducting prescribed fires; rather, it creates a route for practitioners, landowners, and contractors to acquire training and gain confidence about the practice. In other states, such as Florida, prescribed fire is more commonplace because of legal liability protections for CBMs.

Liability protections will be limited to start once established in Oregon. Still, the program would provide a path for future policy supporting prescribed fire, such as a gross negligence standard in the case of escaped fire and a state-backed claims fund (which recently passed in California).

Now, the Oregon Department of Forestry is initiating a **Rules Advisory Committee (RAC)**, which will answer important questions related to the program administration, such as:

What is an equivalent certification (for someone with a certificate from another state, for example)?

Is there a test ODF should administer at the end?

Under what circumstances would someone's certification be revoked?

Should there be tiers of accreditation?



*PHOTO: Amanda Rau*

Complementary to the CBM efforts, **HB 2571** directs the Oregon Department of Consumer and Business Services to conduct a study into liability and prescribed fire insurance in the state.

This study will start in late September and conclude in July 2022, ahead of the 2023 legislative session. These small steps will have a significant impact, laying the foundation for building a prescribed fire workforce in the state. Check out the **Oregon Prescribed Fire Council** mailing list for updates and opportunities to get involved.

**Jenna Knobloch**

Wildfire Program Manager

[jknobloch@sustainablenorthwest.org](mailto:jknobloch@sustainablenorthwest.org)