



Stories from the Field

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Starting Fires

Facts about the Conservancy's Prescribed Fire Programs



The Nature Conservancy uses fire as a tool to manage conservation lands in 38 states and in Mexico. This prescribed burn was conducted by staff in southeast Massachusetts in 2001. Photo by Jim Powers, Nantucket Inquirer and Mirror.

Prescribed fire is a vitally important conservation tool in the United States and in many other parts of the world. Many of the landscapes in which the Conservancy works evolved with fire but fire has been excluded from them for decades. Today, these places are in desperate need of fire, both to restore their ecological integrity and to reduce fuels to prevent unnaturally intense fires that can harm ecosystems, destroy property and threaten lives. The U.S. Fire Learning Network is helping address this need by fostering collaborative partnerships across the country.

VISION ■ Use fire where it is beneficial to both nature and people and keep fire out of ecosystems where it is destructive

LOCATION ■ 38 states and Mexico

AREA ■ 112,468 acres treated in FY2005

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Why Does the Conservancy Use Fire?

Fire, like rain and sunshine, has been an important part of our environment for millions of years. It has helped shape the nature of life on Earth. Depending on the ecosystem, fire can be beneficial, benign or destructive. Most of the ecosystems in the United States evolved with regular — but not necessarily frequent — fire; but because of human actions, fires are behaving differently today than they have throughout history. In much of the West, for example, previous government policies largely advocated fire suppression, which led to the conversion of native grasslands and savannas to dense forests with few grasses. These and other vegetation changes fuel unnaturally severe and dangerous wildfires and degrade habitat for many plants and animals.

Across the United States, the cumulative effects of almost a century of fire exclusion — coupled with other factors such as land management practices and climate change — are threatening human and natural communities alike. An estimated 53% of U.S. forests and rangelands have altered fire regimes — they are experiencing too little, too much, or the wrong kind of fire. In many places, a single unnaturally severe fire can erase decades of conservation work.



Burning our own lands helps the Conservancy demonstrate the benefits of fire to other land managers. Reintroducing fire to this dense oak woodland in Arkansas [left] yielded dramatic results [right]. Today the forest more closely resembles its historical self. Photos by McRee Anderson/TNC.

But Isn't Fire Dangerous?

Fire operations are inherently risky. The Nature Conservancy, however, actively manages risk associated with our prescribed fire operations, which is reflected in our safety record. Fewer than 0.5% of Conservancy-led prescribed burns have resulted in “escapes” in the last five years. The Conservancy adheres to National Wildfire Coordinating Group standards when qualifying staff to lead and assist with burns. And all burns must be conducted according to the terms of a plan approved by designated fire managers.

As a check on our organizational risk management procedures, the Conservancy sponsored an external risk assessment in 2005. Although no critical problems were identified, we are implementing 26 recommendations from these outside experts to help ensure that we are doing everything we can to maintain personnel safety and the safety of communities.

Our fire training emphasizes safety at all stages, and we are investing more in mentoring, organizational learning and advanced training for staff. We are also applying what we've learned over more

than four decades of building and nurturing a strong U.S. fire management program to develop local fire management capacity in Latin America and around the world.

What is the Conservancy's Prescribed Fire Niche?

The Nature Conservancy is a leader in promoting ecologically appropriate fire. Our first burn, conducted in Minnesota in 1961, was for prairie restoration. Today, Conservancy staff and volunteers burn more than 100,000 acres of Conservancy-owned land each year, and we assist in prescribed fires on hundreds of thousands of acres of partner lands. We have active burn programs in 38 states and Mexico, with two more states scheduled to conduct their first prescribed burns in 2006. Our fire training program teaches hundreds of federal and state government personnel each year.

Although we have accomplished a great deal, using fire to maintain the ecological health of our own preserves and helping others who are already burning their lands isn't going to solve what many view as a national crisis: the unhealthy and potentially dangerous condition of more

than half our country's forests and rangelands. As a result, the Conservancy is increasingly leveraging its experience using fire as a management tool to achieve larger, lasting outcomes. We are proposing public policy changes, improving training standards for wildland fire staff, and working to increase public support for appropriate fire use.

Fire Networks: Making a Difference on the Ground

U.S. Fire Learning Network projects, which cover more than 75 million acres, are increasingly moving beyond the collaborative planning stage and implementing large-scale prescribed fire and forest thinning treatments. Network landscapes across the U.S. have treated more than 319,000 acres since 2002. Staff at Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in Oklahoma burned 14,400 acres on the preserve last year, and helped neighboring ranches burn an additional 30,600 acres. And in the Interior Highlands of Arkansas, the Bayou Ecosystem Restoration project has treated more than 50,000 acres with prescribed fire and 7,500 acres with mechanical thinning since 2002.



The U.S. Fire Learning Network — a cooperative project of the USDA Forest Service, U.S. Department of the Interior and The Nature Conservancy — was created in 2002 to accelerate the restoration of fire-adapted ecosystems, those places where fire has been an essential natural process for centuries. The 60-site network promotes learning and innovation among communities, public land managers and conservation practitioners around the country.