

The Sandhills Prescribed Burn Association

The Sandhills Area Land Trust (SALT) is creating a Prescribed Burn Association to promote and support longleaf pine ecosystem restoration in the North Carolina Sandhills through the use of prescribed fires on private lands. One of the most endangered ecosystems in the United States, the longleaf pine ecosystem is important for the economic, cultural and environmental future of the Sandhills region. Private landowners own more than half of the current longleaf acreage in the United States¹, and privately held lands represent both the greatest challenge to and the greatest opportunity for restoring this valued ecosystem. Most private landowners have excluded use of prescribed fires on their land because of a number of valid concerns, including potential liability, lack of training or experience, not enough people to help or needed equipment. Additionally, landowners often do not feel they have enough burn windows or support of their neighbors and community for smoke from burning. Creation of a Prescribed Burn Association can help overcome these barriers and encourage longleaf pine ecosystem restoration on private lands.

Prescribed Burn Association Overview

A PBA is an organization that provides training, equipment and educational programs to landowners and the general public to increase the effectiveness and safety of prescribed fires on private lands. The PBA, as an organization, would not conduct any actual burns, but could help individuals manage their own risk by ensuring appropriate preparations are in place before each burn, including assisting landowners with locating liability insurance, aiding landowners with preparation of a burn plan, creating adequate fire breaks, procuring equipment and ensuring the minimum number of people are present at each burn. PBAs have long been a popular and successful way for Western U.S. landowners to work together to share knowledge, equipment, and labor for prescribed burns; they are a newer concept in the Southeast.

SALT's North Carolina Sandhills Longleaf Pine Project has conducted substantial community outreach through public meetings and surveys and has determined that Sandhills landowners are motivated to use prescribed fire on their lands and have a strong interest in creating a PBA. A Sandhills PBA will provide these many motivated landowners with peer-to-peer mentorship and field days to gain the skills and confidence to move them from being interested to actually using prescribed fire on their woodlands.

Our proposed Sandhills PBA will be highly inclusive and will welcome all landowners and citizens who desire to learn more about managing longleaf pine with prescribed fire. Engaged landowners will include people who have been doing their own burns for years, landowners who are new to the prescribed fire community, and people who may contract out burning on their land but want to be knowledgeable about the process. The Sandhills PBA would be able to seek out grant funding to leverage membership dues and in-kind support. The National Wild Turkey Federation has already procured funding for two burn trailers that the Sandhills PBA will be able to use for landowner burning, which will reduce start-up costs and give members inexpensive access to necessary tools.

The PBA, will be a grass-roots association lead by citizens, structured through a steering committee of committed landowners who use, or are ready to use, prescribed fire. SALT will assist in the creation of the PBA and will provide long-term support for the organization's activities. Relevant state and federal agencies, such as NC Cooperative Extension, NC State University Extension Forestry, NC Forest Service,

¹ America's Longleaf Initiative, www.americaslongleaf.org/the-initiative/goals (Accessed 11/2/2015)

NC Wildlife Resources Commission and local volunteer fire departments, will also be involved. SALT will facilitate the initial meetings and will schedule a North Carolina Certified Prescribed Burn Manager training in conjunction with the North Carolina Forest Service soon after the initial meeting. According to state law, the burn certification training requires that each candidate conduct a burn to become certified; this requirement will provide an immediate incentive for PBA members to start working with each other to conduct their certification burns. PBA members who are already certified can serve as mentors for the new candidates.

Conclusion

Restoration of the highly endangered Longleaf Pine ecosystem requires prescribed burns on privately owned lands. Building private landowners' capability to conduct their own prescribed burns is critical due to the lack of agency and contractor capacity and the limited number of days available to burn. The Sandhills PBA will be a precedent-setting tool that neighbors can use to help each other increase their comfort, capacity and confidence to conduct prescribed burns, thereby breaking through individual and government bottlenecks. An increase in the number of certified citizen burners will multiply local capability to conduct burns. Their involvement will also spread the message that managing longleaf pine through prescribed fire can reduce the risk of wildfire and improve forest habitat. This community-based approach could serve as a model that could be adapted by other communities in North Carolina and around the Southeast to get more essential prescribed fire on a landscape scale.