



Northern Rockies Fire Science Network

A JFSP FIRE SCIENCE EXCHANGE NETWORK

Perspectives: Emerging Prescribed Fire Councils in the Northern Rockies Region

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Across the country prescribed fire councils are emerging as a way to bring different stakeholders together to advance the use of prescribed fire. The concept originated in the southeastern United States and offers a way to share resources, information and programs related to prescribed fire. In the Northern Rockies region, two prescribed fire councils have recently launched: the Idaho Prescribed Fire Council, chaired by Heather Heward of the University of Idaho, and the Montana Prescribed Fire Council coordinated by Jack Rinck of the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC). NRFSN spoke with Heather and Jack about the opportunities and challenges involved in prescribed fire councils.

IDAHO PRESCRIBED FIRE COUNCIL

Heather described the Idaho Prescribed Fire Council as being in the “foundation building” phase, but said the group has an executive committee comprised of five people and an advisory board with 18 members. She explained that the concept of the prescribed fire council unites a variety of partners that have the same interests and gives them a collective effort to figure out what people in the state of Idaho need to use prescribed fire and what mechanisms within the state are holding them back. A big part of what the Idaho Prescribed Fire Council is working on currently is exploring the legal framework around prescribed fire. Heather said a lot of research has gone into looking at barriers and facilitators of burning, and liability has emerged as one of the biggest barriers.



Prescribed fire in Montana
(courtesy of Jack Rinck)

The Northern Rockies Fire Science Network (NRFSN) serves as a go-to resource for managers and scientists involved in fire and fuels management in the Northern Rockies. The NRFSN is funded by the Joint Fire Science Program and is one of 15 Fire Science Exchange Networks across the country. The NRFSN facilitates knowledge exchange by bringing people together to strengthen collaborations, synthesize science, and enhance science application around critical management issues.



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"The thought of there being a liability problem keeps fire from feeling like an accessible idea," Heather said.

Other challenges the Idaho Prescribed Fire Council faces include time constraints from those involved and unknowns about how the state of Idaho approaches prescribed fire. Heather also emphasized the need to ground science in practice and "close the loop" so that managers and the public have access to the latest science and are getting the information they need to do their job effectively.

In 2022, Congress made a significant investment in fuel management activities through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and the Inflation Reduction Act. In order to distribute this funding, state and federal land management agencies are seeking to better understand the community-based capacity available to support and implement prescribed burn projects. To that end, the [Public Lands Policy Group](#) at Colorado State University designed and distributed a survey which found, among other things, that the top reported community-based capacity was communication and outreach. Heather emphasized this as a critical component to the success of prescribed fire councils. "I think that science communication is critical for us to meet our mission of advancing the safe and effective use of prescribed fire," she said.

To learn more about the Idaho Prescribed Fire Council you can visit their website.



Montana Prescribed Burn Council (courtesy of Jack Rinck)

MONTANA PRESCRIBED FIRE COUNCIL

Riding a wave of broad interest and enthusiasm in Montana to start a prescribed fire council, Jack has spent much of the last year recruiting members and forming the Montana Prescribed Fire Council. This past April, the group held its first inaugural meeting where they put the finishing touches on the mission and governing documents and planned for the year to come. The Montana Prescribed Fire Council is organized and led by an 11-person steering committee, with each seat representing a different stakeholder, and an advisory board comprised of non-voting agency representatives. Its general membership is open to all Montanans.

Because Montana has such a strong East/West axis of fuel types, prescribed fire tends to operate much differently, both in operation and perception, on the western side of the state than in the eastern portion. Jack views this as both a challenge and opportunity for the Montana Prescribed Fire Council. On the one hand it's difficult to tie these two audiences together and engage them meaningfully. But on the other hand, there is a significant opportunity for mutual learning from Council members. Jack said from his perspective, one of the biggest benefits

of prescribed fire councils is that they are less formal than state and federal agencies and are more open, collaborative, and accessible to all parties. "We really aim to be inviting to all levels of government, NGOs, private landowners," Jack said, "People who are interested in a tool like prescribed fire are all welcome to come and have a seat at the table."

For Jack and the Montana Prescribed Fire Council, finding sustainable funding for meetings and facilitation has been a challenge. Because the Montana Prescribed Fire Council is coordinated by a state employee, the group is disqualified from certain funding pools that might be available to other councils that operate as non-profits. Jack also expressed the need for more targeted research on prescribed fire, particularly on private land, that can be easily communicated to the public. He said people are interested in learning about the benefits of prescribed fire beyond just hazardous fuel management and wildfire risk reduction. In Montana particularly, he believes that people are interested in topics such as restoring forests, benefiting tree species, and maintaining the land in an ecologically appropriate manner.



Inaugural meeting of the Montana Prescribed Burn Council. (photo courtesy of Jack Rinck)



For more information about the Montana Prescribed Fire Council, or how to get involved, you can fill out this form.