

U.S. Natural Climate Solutions Accelerator

Round 3 Finalist: Wallowa Resources and Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition

Initiative: Accelerating the Use of Prescribed Fire through Partnerships

NCS Pathway: Forests: Controlled Burns

U.S. Geographic Focus: Southwest, Northwest

15-months Pilot States: Washington, California, New Mexico

Controlled burns (also called prescribed fire) are critical to restore ecological function and develop durable carbon stocks in fire-adapted forest systems to help mitigate climate change. Yet land managers are behind in utilizing controlled burns on the ground. **“Accelerating the Use of Prescribed Fire through Partnerships”** initiative led by the Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition will work with prescribed fire practitioners and Forest Service staff to overcome persistent cultural and policy barriers to expand adoption and deployment. By clarifying existing legal authorities, demonstrating best practices and developing model agreements the team plans to advance scalable solutions to accelerate the use of controlled burns.

How it works: The initiative plans to work with the Forest Service and community nonprofit prescribed fire burn crews to expand demonstrations, diffuse adoption of best practices and develop model agreements for cooperative burning in Western National Forests in Washington, California, and New Mexico.

Innovative feature: Inconsistent interpretation of agency policy can make sharing of resources between the Forest Service and NGO partners complex and burdensome, slowing down progress. NGOs are reported to be responsible for 93% of the increase in acres where controlled burns have been applied in the United States since 2000. Partners often bring additional resources as well as extra staff capacity to burns but current agreement structures are difficult to navigate and are subject to variable interpretation, preventing them from assisting more frequently. In addition, misunderstandings about tools, qualifications, and risk management can limit use of controlled burns with partners. The initiative plans to help address barriers and capacity limitations and to expand the adoption of model agreements to allow more partners to help accelerate the use of prescribed fire. Coordinating larger burn efforts can considerably lower costs and improve results. Expansion of efforts can also help to support local jobs, and to attract innovative investments through public private partnerships which aim to reduce wildfire risk.

Scaling/Replication: The initiative will offer new strategies and promote adoption of novel approaches across landscapes where cooperative burning can be conducted with NGO partners. The team plans to utilize its extensive network of NGO, state, and federal partners in the Western states to encourage diffusion and adoption of model agreements, boosting burn capacity and prescribed fire use. The practice can be applied in any national forests with acres where cooperative burns can be conducted with NGO partners.

Co-benefits: Fire adapted landscapes provide a multitude of ecological co-benefits and lower human health risks due to direct wildfire risk and smoke exposure. In addition, these landscapes offer increased economic benefits from restoration crew work, and avoided costs to potential property damage, recreation and tourism.

Climate mitigation benefit: Forests play an important role as carbon sinks and pools in climate change mitigation efforts. Unfortunately, after a century of fire suppression, harvest, and grazing, many forests in the American West, once adapted to frequent fire, are now potential sources of carbon emissions ([Hurteau, Koch, Hungate 2008](#)). Prescribed fire is critical to restore Western forests and both reduce potential emissions and help develop and restore durable carbon stocks ([Hessberg et al 2014](#)). Studies modeling wide-scale application of prescribed fire show 18-25% reductions of carbon dioxide emissions compared to a wildfire in an untreated system, and as much as a 60% reduction in emissions in specific fire-adapted forest systems (Weidinmyer & Hurteau, 2009).

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