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## Prescribed Burning for a Safer Community

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Wildfire, and how to protect ourselves from its destructive effects, is one of the hottest topics in our communities right now. The intense fires and resulting smoke we've all witnessed over the last few years are problems that need to be addressed with meaningful solutions. It may seem counterintuitive but one of the most important ways to mitigate the impact of wildfire in our communities is the use of *more* fire, specifically controlled or prescribed burning on both private and public lands. The Applegate Partnership is working to put this vital tool back in our toolbox.

Controlled burning is the careful application of fire to the landscape during ideal environmental conditions of temperature, humidity, wind speed/direction, and fuel moisture, in order to safely consume the fine fuels (less than 3" diameter) that primarily carry wildfire. This use of fire goes far back into human history and continues today with modern fire management practices. It was a primary tool used by native cultures for thousands of years to reduce fuel loads, improve forage for game animals and provided for many other ecological benefits. Currently, wildland firefighters rely heavily on controlled burning in the form of "backfiring" operations to remove unburned fuel between control lines and the advancing flame front. In this way it is often fire, not water, which stops the spread of a wildfire. Federal agencies also use prescribed burning on public lands as the preferred tool to maintain safe fuel levels after mechanical fuel reduction has been performed.

The importance of increased prescribed burning to manage wildfire risk has been recognized in planning documents at the federal, regional, and local levels. Unfortunately, the use of controlled burning on private lands in the western United States has been relatively limited due to the complexity of planning, permitting, and liability concerns. At the Applegate Partnership we're working to overcome those hurdles, and get useful fire back on the ground.

Our region is often described as a “fire adapted” ecosystem, meaning the flora and fauna of our area have evolved to withstand the effects of our historic fire regime and quickly bounce back to a healthy state. Research has shown southwest Oregon to have a high frequency/low to mixed severity fire regime. This means our landscape experienced frequent fires (tree ring studies indicate an average fire return interval of 8 years) that primarily burned at a low intensity with some amount of medium to high severity burning mixed in. The Miller Complex in 2017 was a good example of this, burning with 66% low, 27% medium, and only 7% high severity.

This frequent return of fire to our landscape allowed only a small amount of new growth to accumulate so when fire did come through it burned at a lower intensity. If fire is excluded from landscapes like ours (as has happened since the advent of modern fire suppression practices approximately 50-70 years ago) the accumulation of fuel builds up and leads to devastatingly severe wildfires when fire finally does reenter the landscape. Prescribed burning is a vital tool to keep fuel loads at a safe level, so when fire does return, its effects are moderate and manageable.

Recognizing the importance of prescribed burning, the Applegate Partnership is working with local partners to facilitate the use of this important tool on private land in our community. Our group is helping interested landowners develop burn plans, find grant funding for prescribed burning and the initial mechanical fuel reduction, develop work cooperatives among neighbors, and provide the crucial insurance coverage for this vitally important work. We are also interested in training a local workforce of qualified individuals to carry out this work in our community on a continual basis.

If you are interested in the use of prescribed fire on your property or would like to get involved on the ground learning how to use this important tool, contact me at [aaron@apwc.info](mailto:aaron@apwc.info). If you would like to learn more about the topic of prescribed fire and how it is used go to [www.applegatepartnershipwc.org/programs](http://www.applegatepartnershipwc.org/programs) for links to articles, research papers, and videos.

Together we can use prescribed burning to protect our community and reduce the impact of wildfires.



2018 prescribed fire training exchange (TRES) in the Applegate, photo by Jon Bailey, The Nature Conservancy