



Forest Service  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

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A STRATEGY TO EXPAND  
***PRESCRIBED FIRE TRAINING***  
IN THE WEST

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Forest Service released the “National Prescribed Fire Program Review” in September 2022. It states: “By January 1, 2023, we will establish a Western Prescribed Fire Training curriculum with the interagency fire and research community, and partners, to expand the successes of the National Interagency Prescribed Fire Training Center. . . This curriculum will incorporate the knowledge and experience of Tribes, partners, and communities and include a strategy of training and developing skills together so we can build collective capacity to expand the use of prescribed burning on National Forest System and other lands.”

The Western Prescribed Fire Training Center (PFTC-West) is an expansion of the National Interagency Prescribed Fire Training Center (PFTC) in Tallahassee, FL. The current PFTC program targets agency administrators responsible for prescribed fire programs and decision making, as well as the development of prescribed fire practitioners. Establishing a Western Prescribed Fire Training Center will increase the pace of prescribed fire training-to-qualification in the Western United States, provide trainees real-time experience in different fuel types and terrain, and ultimately increase national prescribed fire resource capacity.

The three key elements for building out PFTC-West include: (1) increasing staffing; (2) establishing focus groups to explore new curriculum and prescribed fire modules, including unmanned aircraft systems (UAS); and (3) expanding the PFTC Steering Committee. Plans are underway to work with national forests and grasslands, Tribes, and partners—such as State

forestry agencies and The Nature Conservancy (TNC)—to establish training landscapes in all Western States that can support the Western Prescribed Fire Training Center program.

Staffing will grow the PFTC organization from 4 full-time positions (located in Tallahassee, FL) to 12 full-time (and 1 part-time) positions and have greater breadth of interagency involvement. To support expansion, the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) are adding positions.

The cornerstone for creating PFTC-West will be a collaboration between the Fire and Aviation Management (FAM) workforce development and training branch, the Rocky Mountain Research Station Missoula Fire Sciences Laboratory, Colorado Forest Restoration Institute, experienced prescribed fire practitioners, and the existing PFTC Steering Committee. Through a series of focus groups, this collaborative will identify successful practices, skills, and techniques that can be transferred into future PFTC-West modules, using both classroom and hands-on prescribed fire activities.

The PFTC Steering Committee is composed of national leadership from the USDA Forest Service, DOI agencies, TNC, the Florida Forest Service’s State representative for the National Association of State Foresters, and a Tall Timbers Research Station representative. The steering committee is in support of PFTC-West and expansion to include Western States.



# INTRODUCTION

The prescribed fire implementation environment continues to grow in complexity, whereas the ability of practitioners to practice and hone their expertise has lagged, particularly in the Western United States. The current National Interagency Prescribed Fire Training Center (PFTC) training program targets agency administrators responsible for prescribed fire programs and decision making and the development of prescribed fire practitioners. Establishing a Western Prescribed Fire Training Center (PFTC-West) will provide trainees real-time experience in different western landscape fuel types and terrain and ultimately increase national prescribed fire resource capacity in support of the Forest Service's Wildfire Crisis Strategy.

Implementing the vision for PFTC-West will enhance agency administrator and prescribed fire practitioner competence and confidence. This document lays out the intention and steps necessary to create PFTC-West. PFTC-West is an expansion, not a replacement, of the current PFTC. The two entities will work together to accelerate training and allow a larger number of students to reach their targeted qualifications faster and more efficiently. Additionally, several long-term goals have been identified regarding relationship building efforts essential for the success of the PFTC-West program.



The Prescribed Fire Training Center-West is focused on experiential training in different western landscapes, such as ponderosa pine forests on the San Juan National Forest, CO. USDA Forest Service photo by Deana Harms.

# THE PFTC-WEST EXPANSION

The current PFTC program is jointly managed by the Forest Service and DOI's Fish and Wildlife Service. The organizational structure includes three FWS positions, eight Forest Service positions, and one position provided by Tall Timbers through an agreement. The PFTC training model uses both classroom and hands-on prescribed burning activities to teach techniques and methods to successfully plan and implement a prescribed fire program.

Current course concepts include agency administrator workshops, prescribed fire burn boss workshops, and UAS aerial academies. Courses include wide participation from entities outside of Federal land management agencies, including Tribes, foreign nations, and partners from State agencies and nongovernmental organizations. The training portfolio provides classroom and hands-on field training under the guidance of qualified professionals to execute prescribed fire projects in the southeast.

The PFTC Steering Committee began exploring the concept of another experiential training opportunity in the Western United States starting in 2020. A prescribed fire training center in a Western State was proposed in draft legislation known as the National Prescribed Fire Act of 2020 (S. 4625).

The knowledge and skills needed by a program manager or fuels practitioner are unique to land management agencies, are experiential in nature, and need to be practical and relevant to western landscapes. To educate and build the confidence of fire personnel, they need opportunities that run the full spectrum of a fuels program.

To integrate local communities into landscape-scale burn planning, training should expand to local fire departments and landowners across the West. This means providing access to opportunities to work on "hard" skills within western landscapes with varying ecosystems and varied complexity terrain. There is also a desire to improve fire effects monitoring and "soft" skills like planning and collaboration experience.

Most of PFTC's curriculum is already national in scope and content; the learning objectives are not specific to the landscapes or conditions in the southeast, and presentations for all existing courses and workshops are delivered by a national cadre made up of experts from across the country. However, it is recognized that a new curriculum—along with a changed module configuration—is necessary to increase the scope and scale of prescribed fire on western landscapes.

PFTC's success is dependent upon the symbiotic relationships forged with partners, both nationally and internationally, with a vision for success that includes all the land stewards seeking educational and experiential learning. The expansion of PFTC-West will require the involvement and participation of the PFTC Steering Committee, inclusive of additional partners representing Western States.







## BUILDING A ***SUCCESSFUL PFTC-WEST***

### **1. EXPANDED STAFFING**

A first critical step to building a successful program is expanding the organization and the interagency staffing composition. The PFTC organization has recently expanded from 4 full-time positions (located in Tallahassee, FL) to 12 full-time positions. These positions will primarily support the PFTC expansion.

### **2. PFTC STEERING COMMITTEE**

The expansion of the PFTC program in the West will require the engagement and leadership of the current PFTC Steering Committee and the addition of Tribes and partners, including nongovernmental, State, and local organizations. This dialogue has begun and there is overall support for PFTC-West from these groups. The Forest Service will seek concurrence with the PFTC Steering Committee membership as the PFTC-West initiative is further developed. An Interagency Strategic Plan for PFTC was finalized in February 2023 and included adoption of a PFTC-West concept. This strategic plan reinforces the mission statement for the National Interagency Prescribed Fire Training Center and articulates the vision and direction of the center over the next 5 years.

### **3. FOCUS GROUPS AND WESTERN PRESCRIBED FIRE WORKING GROUP—CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT**

The cornerstone for creation of PFTC-West modules, including curriculum, is the inclusion of the research community. The Forest Service's Rocky Mountain Research Station, along with Tall Timbers and Colorado State University's Colorado Forest Restoration Institute, have agreed to work together to assist Fire and Aviation Management (FAM) to conduct focus groups and explore new curriculum and training modules for PFTC-West. The current training model uses both classroom and hands-on prescribed activities to teach techniques and methods to successfully



Focus groups comprised of successful prescribed fire practitioners from various agencies and Tribal nations will assist in the development of new curriculum for the PFTC-West expansion. USDA Forest Service photo by Deana Harms.

plan and implement a prescribed fire program. In a 20-day workshop, fire practitioners attain on average 17 days of on-the-ground experience with prescribed fire in the southeast. To create similar experiences in the West, a new model will be required, as burn windows are generally much shorter.

With assistance from the innovation and organizational learning team at the Missoula Fire Sciences Laboratory, FAM workforce development and training staff convened conversations with experienced, successful prescribed fire practitioners. The prescribed fire practitioners represented various agencies and Tribal nations with successful burning programs. Through a series of focus group meetings, FAM leadership sought to understand what skills, knowledge, and information have helped current practitioners create successful larger scale and higher complexity burns and programs.

To put the focus group information into practice, a western prescribed fire working group was assembled in autumn 2023. The working group included FAM leadership, line officers, and Rocky Mountain

Research Station staff, as well as representatives from the PFTC Steering Committee, the National Incident Management Organization (NIMO), the Colorado Forest Restoration Institute, Tribes, and Tall Timbers. The western prescribed fire working group will use the information gathered during focus groups to develop the western module experience and curriculum for PFTC-West. FAM workforce development and training staff, with the assistance of the research community and subject matter experts, will create the future training for the prescribed fire practitioners at PFTC-West.

There is also a strong desire and need to work with the UAS program to expand the use of prescribed fire. Extensive use of drones for wildfire leaves little to no availability for prescribed fire work. The Forest Service proposes creating a PFTC drone division of highly skilled pilots, and a fleet designed for prescribed fire, that would be trained at PFTC or PFTC-West. This resource could potentially be available to other agencies and States, as well as nongovernmental organizations, under agreements. This will be explored through a focus group concept.



## 4. LIVE TRAINING ON WESTERN LANDSCAPES

The Forest Service Washington Office will work with regional offices to identify prescribed fire projects throughout the West. Projects must be National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) ready and represent a variety of ecosystems and complexity to provide opportunities for PFTC-West training modules. The agency should identify one landscape per State to assist in developing relationships and collaboration with Tribes and States and to ensure greater burn-window opportunities. Data on weather records, successful burn days, and missed burn days will be important for identifying good locations. FAM will work with regional fire directors from the Federal agencies to identify a single point of contact in each geographic area for all communication and information needs as PFTC explores different ideas and models for delivering on-the-ground live prescribed fire experience in the West.

FAM workforce development and training is requesting the assistance of NIMO to provide support for up to 3 years. This support is necessary to provide a flexible framework for moving and supporting resources across the West to deliver new modules. FAM workforce development and training worked with NIMO in fiscal year 2023 to get fire practitioners experience on burns planned in the Southwest and Intermountain Regions. The December 21, 2022, letter on expanding the use of contracted resources for priority fuels work

outlines various incident procurement operations contracts and agreements available to the FAM program in support of PFTC activities.

Like the southeast-based PFTC model, the success of the PFTC-West model will rely on flexibility and mobility to rapidly shift capacity to meet the on-the-ground needs. Classrooms will be established near the prescribed fire projects in existing offices or local buildings with suitable facilities. While there are currently no plans to purchase or lease a brick-and-mortar training center, these options may be explored in the future.

A proposal for a set of burn boss positions targeted for nonagency prescribed fire applicants has been brought forward by the National Coalition of Prescribed Fire Councils and is under consideration by the National Wildfire Coordinating Group's Fuels Management Committee. This is a necessary first step toward defining a potential national standard for nonagency personnel. This approach is also a critical part of the PFTC-West vision, as it would facilitate increased local involvement in prescribed fire activities across the West. If adopted, this approach presents the best opportunity for creating a shared standard that both Federal and non-Federal entities can use for providing training and experience opportunities to practitioners that are not necessarily employed by Federal or State fire agencies.



Prescribed burn projects from across the country will be identified for future training grounds, such as this prescribed fire in eastern Montana. Bureau of Land Management photo by Deana Harms.

# GOALS, DELIVERABLES, AND TIMEFRAMES

Goal	Deliverable	Status
Complete staffing additions to PFTC to meet the commitment to increase burn practitioner competence and confidence	New Forest Service NTE positions funded by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law include: 1 assistant director to establish the National Interagency Fuels Academy, 1 assistant director to support western deliveries of PFTC, 2 training specialists, and 1 administrative support person	5 new Forest Service NTE positions have been hired
	New DOI positions (1 FWS, 1.5 BLM, 1 BIA)	FWS position hired; ongoing work with partners to identify timeframe for others
	Complete contract actions to retain and/or increase the number of prescribed fire experts under contract with PFTC to deliver ongoing and new wtraining	Submit through Forest Service contracting by fall 2024
	NIMO assistance to provide training products	Ongoing, as needed
Expand the PFTC Steering Committee to include Tribes and western partners	Host meetings throughout the Western United States with Tribes and partners to gather input on training	Completed in 2023
	Finalize strategic plan for current PFTC	Completed in 2023
Develop a new training model for prescribed fire in the Western United States based on the current PFTC model	Focus group discussions with RMRS and CFRI	Completed in 2023
	Establishment of a western prescribed fire working group	Completed in 2023
	Concepts for conducting live prescribed fire training in the West	Completed in 2023
Increase the number of workshops and include western delivery of workshops in FY 2024 and beyond	One agency administrator prescribed fire workshop at a western venue	Scheduled for May 2024 in Bend, OR
	Two 20-day prescribed fire modules in the Western United States	Delivering 8 modules in FY 2024
	One 20-day “Fire Leadership for Women” prescribed fire module in the West	Scheduled for FY 2025
Expand aerial ignition academies to support UAS program	Evaluate PFTC modules for UAS delivery of prescribed fire	Completed in 2023
Identify at least one landscape per State to collaborate with Tribal and State agencies on prescribed fire	Identify a single point of contact in each geographic area for all communication and information needs	Completed in 2023

*BIA = Bureau of Indian Affairs; BLM = Bureau of Land Management; CFRI = Colorado Forest Restoration Institute; DOI = Department of the Interior; FWS = Fish & Wildlife Service; FY = fiscal year; NIMO = National Incident Management Organization; NTE = not-to-exceed; PFTC = Prescribed Fire Training Center; RMRS = Rocky Mountain Research Station; UAS = unmanned aircraft systems*

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