NC STATE UNIVERSITY

Prescribed Fire Council Characteristics, Priorities, and Needs

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Introduction

Prescribed fire managers face increasingly complex challenges. If the concerns and misunderstandings that generate those challenges are not responded to collaboratively, they might limit or threaten the use of prescribed fire as a management tool. Thirty-three Prescribed Fire Councils exist in 29 states across the United States (Figure 1), and serve as mechanisms to assist fire practitioners, policymakers, regulators, and citizens with issues surrounding prescribed fire use.

Prescribed Fire Councils bring together natural resource professionals, public and private land managers, and others who support the use of prescribed fire. The Councils aim to promote public education about the benefits of prescribed fire and advocate for the ability to use prescribed fire as a land management tool now and in the future. The utilization of prescribed fire and other fuel management techniques promoted by these councils aim, in part, to reduce fuel loads and other potential risks before wildfire occurs.

In Fall 2017, a survey was conducted to gather information from the existing Councils. This study is meant to highlight the similarities and differences between Prescribed Fire Councils across the country, and to create better opportunities for success of these and developing Councils by collaborating with and learning from one another.

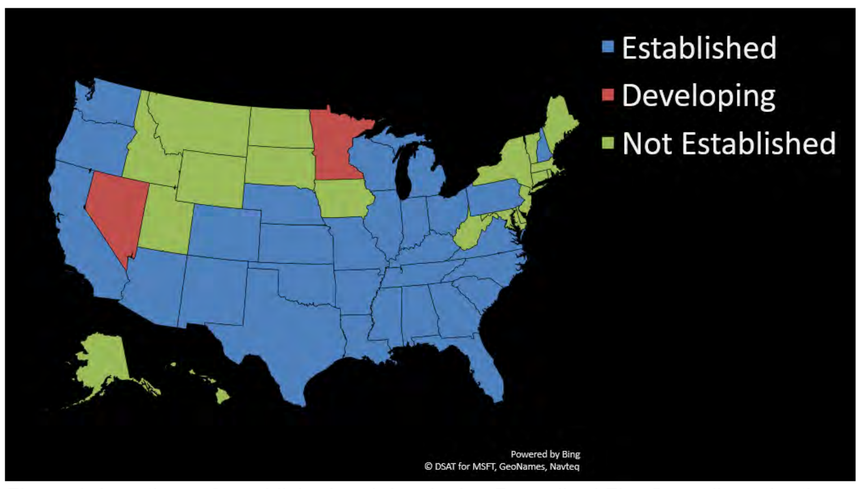

Figure 1. Locations of established and developing Prescribed Fire Councils at the time of the survey (Fall 2017). California and Florida both have three Councils in their state, located in the southern, central, and northern regions.

Methodology

In Fall 2017, an online questionnaire was distributed to each of the 33 Councils using the Survey Monkey online survey platform. The Chair/President from each Council was asked to gain consensus from their Board or others when answering the survey, thus resulting in one survey response per Council.

Results

Survey results depict the variety in structure, membership, characteristics, needs, and priorities of the existing Councils. Of the existing Councils that were surveyed, all 33 Councils responded to the survey for a 100% response rate. Results are provided in the following categories: Annual Meeting, Membership, Funding, and Priorities & Future Needs.

Annual Meeting

Annual meeting length ranged from ½ day to two full days, with 15% of the Councils always including a field component, and 24% sometimes including a field component.

Results show that at least four Councils do not have an annual meeting (Figure 2). Of those that do have a meeting, attendance ranged from ≤50 to >250 people at their most recent meeting. Two Councils reported that their meeting attendance had declined over the past five years, while 58% reported stable attendance, and 33% reported increasing attendance.

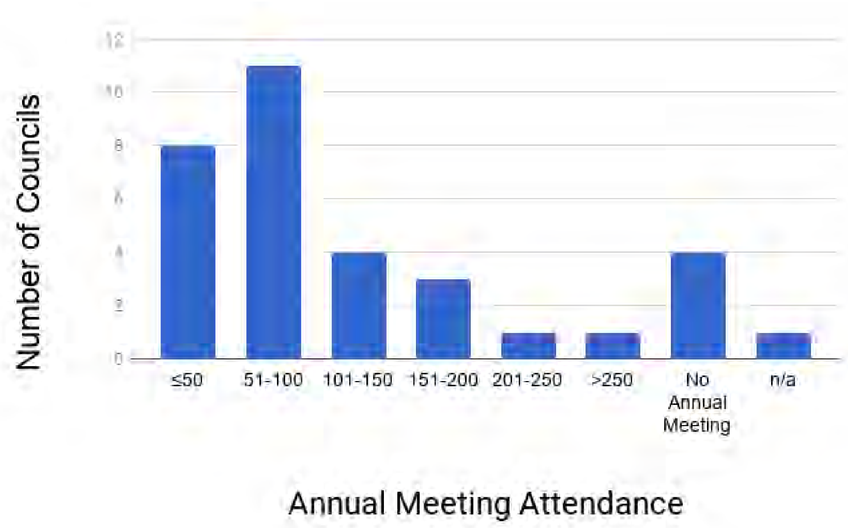

Figure 2. Annual meeting attendance at each Council's most recent annual meeting.

Membership

All 33 Councils (100%) stated that they have a formal Board, with a Chair or President and other Board positions. Thirteen councils reported having no formal membership process. Of the Councils that do maintain a membership, membership ranged from ≤50 to up to 200 people.

When asked about the composition of their membership (or annual meeting attendance for Councils that did not have a formal membership process), results showed that state agency employees comprised the greatest membership (30%) for all Councils combined (Figure 3). Federal agency employees and Non-governmental organizations followed with 18% and 14%, respectively. Landowners, consultants, academia, and others (Tribal, City/County) comprised much smaller portions of the total membership.

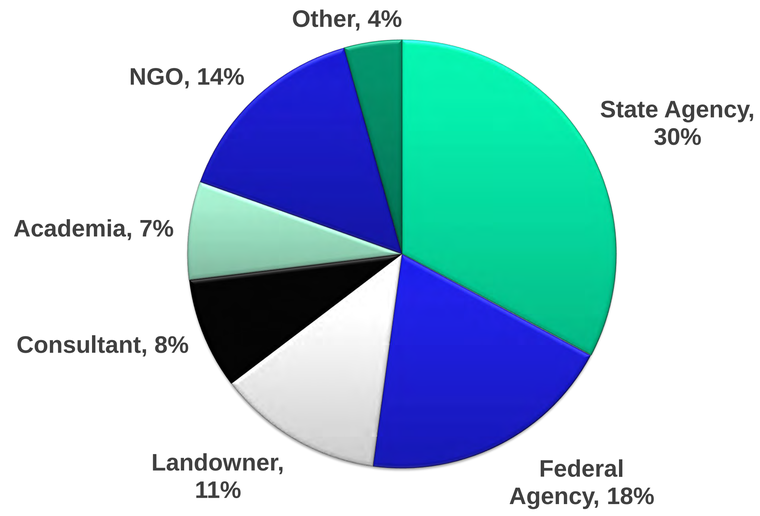

Figure 3. Membership (or annual meeting attendance for Councils that did not have a formal membership process) composition for all Councils combined.

For councils which have a membership process, two reported a decreasing membership, four reported an increasing membership, and thirteen reported a stable membership trend over the past five years (Figure 4).

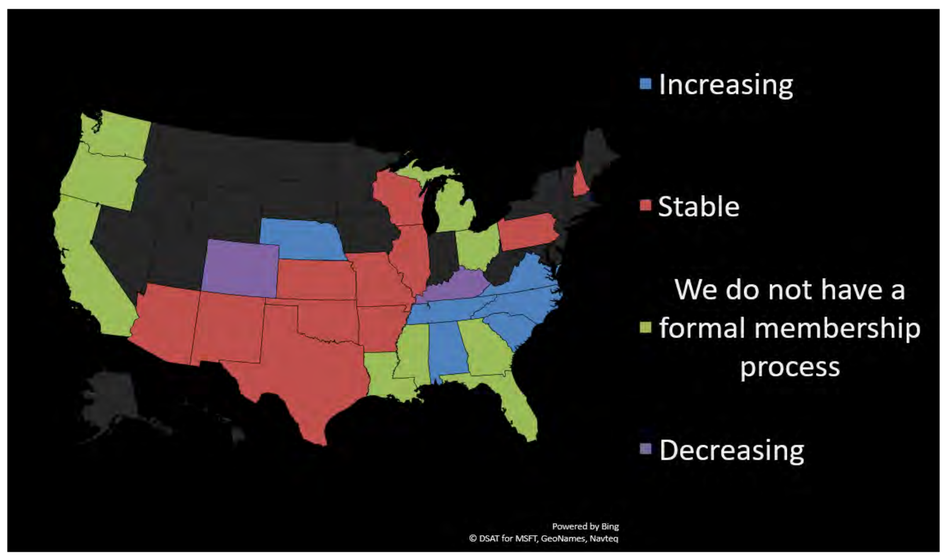

Figure 4. Membership trends within each state.

Funding

Of the Councils that have a formal membership process, 15 Councils reported having no annual dues. The remaining Councils reported membership dues between $1-50 (Figure 5). Dues were reported to cover expenses related to workshops, training, newsletters, websites, annual meetings, travel, and more.

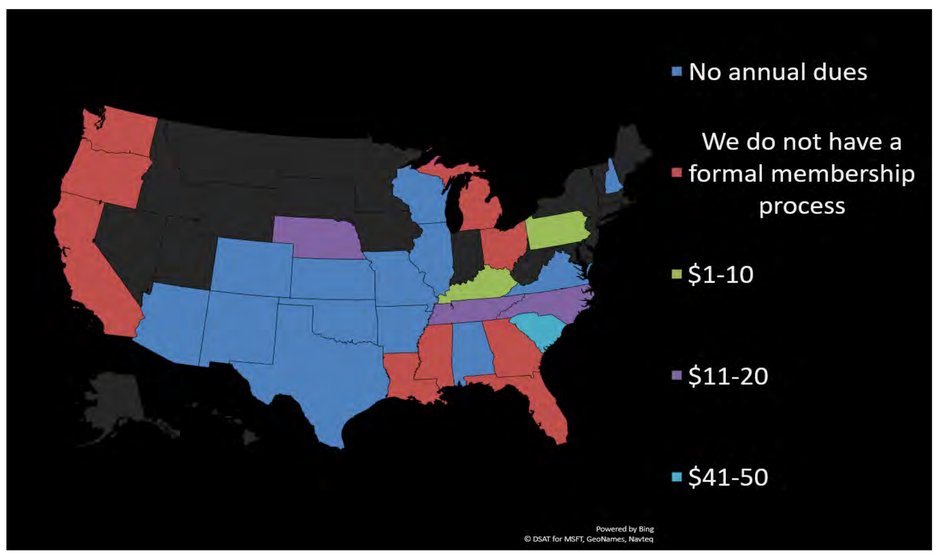

Figure 5. Annual membership dues per state.

Councils varied widely in their financial structure and status. While some were all volunteer based, others reported having paid staff. In addition, several had 5013C status. Many reported receiving sponsorships, donations and federal and private grants, and some made profit from selling promotional items such as signs, hats, pins, and t-shirts, or by collecting a registration fee for the annual meeting. Operating expenses ranged widely from $0-50,000.

Successes & Areas for Improvement

Councils were asked to report on what worked well and what did not work well for them over the past year. Figure 6 provides a wordcloud representation of their responses.

Figure 6. Self-reported successes (top) and areas for improvement (bottom) over the past year for all Councils combined. Larger words represent words that appeared more frequently in the text responses.

Priorities & Future Needs

Councils were asked to report on their top three priorities for the coming year, as well as any future needs. Similar responses were combined below for reporting purposes.

Priorities

- Annual meetings
- Workshops
- Training
- Membership & growth
- Public, state & federal collaboration
- More prescribed fires on the ground
- Support & training for Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges (TREX)
- Public outreach & social media
- Right to Burn Legislation
- Education
- Increase in insurance companies to provide landowners with prescribed burn insurance
- Financial support (long term)

Future Needs

- Assistance with funding and grants
- Information regarding successes from other councils
- Larger representation in national fire policy
- Legal guidance
- Public exposure

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