

GEORGIA FORESTRY  
COMMISSION



# Prescribed Fire in Georgia

## *A Strategic Plan*

### *2008-2020*



## Introduction

Fire is a natural part of Georgia's landscape and must be managed for a positive influence on sustainability. Wildfire suppression has been Georgia's management option for nearly eight decades. Prescribed fire helps with sustainability and is supported and promoted.



- Wildfires could destroy millions of acres of forest land and threaten lives and property if left unchecked.
- Prescribed fire is a safe way to apply a natural process, ensure ecosystem health and reduce wildfire risk.
- Urbanization places more lives and property at risk from wildfire and reduces options for proper fire management.

The greatest challenge from a fire perspective is to manage both wildfires and prescribed fire in the face of increasing urbanization. Wildfires become complex in an urban environment presenting a matrix of appropriate management responses and life safety issues. Forest sustainability loses priority to the safety of people and their homes.

Prescribed fire offers a proactive approach; providing many benefits for healthy forests in addition to a reduction in likely damage from

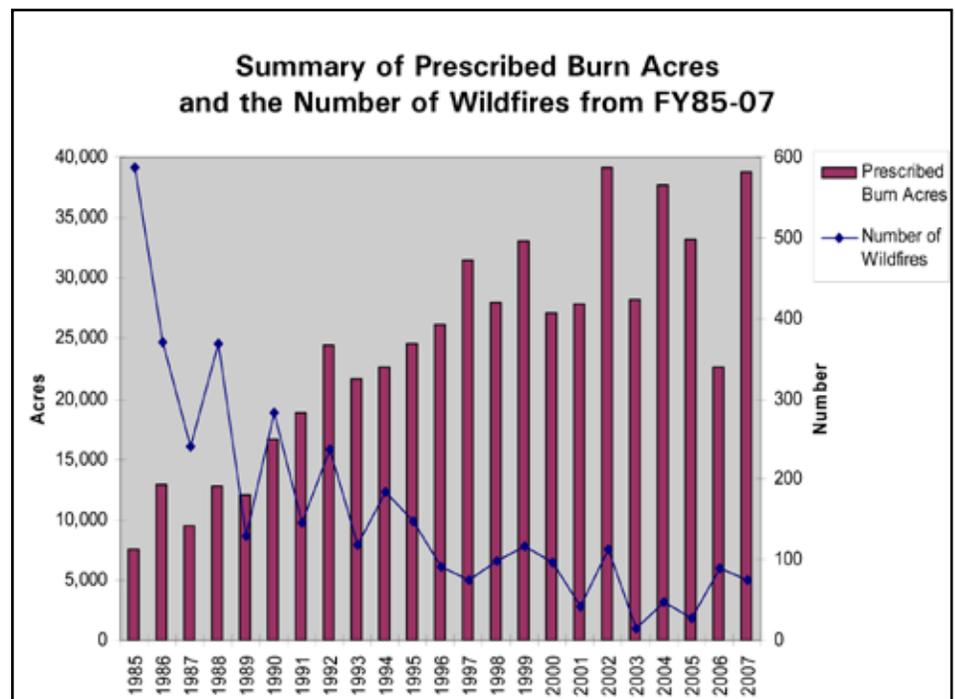
wildfire. Most forest ecosystems, flora and fauna, benefit from prescribed fire.

Urbanization increases concerns over fire. Air quality has become a major concern in Georgia, targeting prescribed fire as one of many sources of harmful emissions. Drift smoke from prescribed fire and wildfires concerns urban dwellers who understand very little about natural forest processes.

Future Georgians must come to understand the life sustaining properties of healthy forests, important to their very livelihood, and the natural role that fire plays in ecosystems.

## Background

In January 2008, 40 professionals from Georgia and Florida with over 500 years of combined experience convened a "Fire Summit" at the Tall Timbers Research Station and Land Conservancy. The outcome of that



*While a statewide study has never been conducted, this representative study done at Ft. Benning, GA shows a significant reduction in wildfires concurrent with an increase in prescribed burning.*

three-day Summit is the foundation for this strategic plan, tempered with some individual state priorities. Key points of a “desired future condition” (DFC) were used to craft a VISION STATEMENT for 2020. Significant “barriers” to attaining the DFC were translated into GOAL STATEMENTS. Implementation “strategies” for each “barrier” became the OBJECTIVES for each goal. GOALS and OBJECTIVES reflect the highest individual state priorities based on the current and projected status for prescribed burning.



**A Vision for 2020**

**Mission Statement**

To protect the right, encourage the use of, and promote the public understanding of prescribed fire.

**Vision Statement**

To create an environment in which the practice of prescribed fire is

embraced and demanded by the public as an essential land management tool. Because it is sufficiently supported by necessary resources, Prescribed Fire is conducted in a manner that ensures the safety and health of the public and firefighters, maintains natural fire cycles, and reduces the risk of wildfire.

**Goals and Objectives for Attaining the Vision**

Each GOAL represents a benchmark to be strived for by the year 2020. OBJECTIVES for each

GOAL reflect more specific work that needs to be accomplished in the next five years in order to make progress toward that GOAL. Each OBJECTIVE has a designated accomplishment year and an assigned group or agency that has agreed to lead the effort for implementing the OBJECTIVE. Progress reports will be submitted periodically to the State Forester. The details of implementation will be determined by the lead group. Adjustments and amendments will be made to the plan annually.

**Goals Selected from Summit**

1. Implement a focused and effective communication and education campaign for garnering informed public support, status, and recognition.
2. Manage smoke from prescribed fire to minimize impacts on air quality and highway traffic.
3. Increase incentives and financial assistance to land managers using prescribed fire.
4. Acquire sufficient resources to promote and implement prescribed fire operations on public and private lands.
5. Raise the organizational priority for prescribed fire to promote and implement operations starting in 2008 GFC employees doing prescribed burning on private lands (lead group).
6. Take a more proactive role in growth management to mitigate future impacts of increasing urbanization.
7. Enhance the professionalism of our prescribed fire practitioners. Expedite the transfer of new prescribed fire technology to field use.

**GOAL 1:** Implement a focused and effective communication and education campaign for garnering informed public support, status, and recognition.

OBJECTIVE	TIME FRAME	LEAD ORGANIZATION
<p>Create and implement a standard communication plan by end of 2009. (GFC, FDOF, SCDNR Lead Group-13 Southern States Steering Committee, grant funded).</p> <p>Tasks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Identify and distribute key messages to public showing the benefits of prescribed burning.</li> <li>■ Develop a “brand” for prescribed burning similar to the “Smokey” campaign.</li> <li>■ Introduce fire education in school curricula using private and government personnel.</li> <li>■ Retain a public relations firm to do “Disney” style promotion.</li> <li>■ Inform media personnel (TV or radio) of the benefits of fire weather forecasts for public in their area.</li> </ul>	<p>2009</p> <p>2008</p> <p>2010</p> <p>2010</p> <p>2010</p>	<p>Lead Group</p> <p>Lead Group</p> <p>Lead Group</p> <p>Lead Group</p> <p>Georgia Prescribed Fire Council Lead Group</p>

**GOAL 2:** Manage smoke from prescribed fire to minimize impacts on air quality and highway traffic.

OBJECTIVE	TIME FRAME	LEAD ORGANIZATION
<p>Create a centralized and coordinated authorization system.</p> <p>Utilize the latest technology to model and track smoke plumes and monitor visibility in smoke sensitive areas.</p> <p>Influence state and federal air quality regulators on the relationship of prescribed fire and wildfire emissions with periodic briefings.</p> <p>Improve training and procedures for law enforcement personnel associated with prescribed fire.</p>	<p>2010</p> <p>2012</p> <p>2008 and ongoing</p> <p>2009</p>	<p>GFC Lead Group</p> <p>GFC Lead Group, partner with USFS-SRS</p> <p>GA Prescribed Fire Council-Air Quality Committee Lead Group</p> <p>GFC Lead Group</p>

**GOAL 3:** Increase incentives and financial assistance to land managers using prescribed fire.

<b>OBJECTIVE</b>	<b>TIME FRAME</b>	<b>LEAD ORGANIZATION</b>
Review existing federal and state cost share programs to identify and enhance prescribed fire opportunities on private lands.	2009	GFC/DNR Lead Group
Elevate the priority of prescribed fire in ranking of competing projects.	2009	GFC Lead Group
Increase the proportion of state fire funds directed to prescribed fire.	2012	GFC/DNR Lead Group

**GOAL 4:** Acquire sufficient resources to promote and implement prescribed fire operations on public and private lands.

<b>OBJECTIVE</b>	<b>TIME FRAME</b>	<b>LEAD ORGANIZATION</b>
Maximize use of current resources for prescribed burning.	Ongoing	GFC Lead Group
Develop a needs assessment that summarizes required resources for meeting the workload.	2009	GFC/DNR Lead Group
Streamline the MOU process through public and private agreements.	2009	TNC Lead Group with participating GFC, DNR, USFWS
Form interagency prescribed fire teams including rural fire departments.	2010	TNC, GFC, DNR, USFWS Lead Group

**GOAL 5:** Raise the organizational priority for prescribed fire to promote and implement operations starting in 2008. GFC employees doing prescribed burning on private lands (lead group).

<b>OBJECTIVE</b>	<b>TIME FRAME</b>	<b>LEAD ORGANIZATION</b>
Reflect the high priority of prescribed fire in manager's performance standards.		
Increase the location and availability of the state certification program training.	2011	GFC Lead Group
Standardize the fire qualifications for cooperators.	2012	GFC Lead Group
Provide better training for current positions dealing with prescribed fire.	2010	GFC Lead Group

**GOAL 6:** Take a more proactive role in growth management to mitigate future impacts of increasing urbanization.

OBJECTIVE	TIME FRAME	LEAD ORGANIZATION
Address issues of local government intervention into the authorization process by keeping authorization under state forestry authority.	Ongoing	GFC Lead Group
Engage local growth management processes through comprehensive planting (insert specific prescribed fire language) to preserve the ability to burn in urban/suburban environments (burning in green spaces).	Ongoing	GA Prescribed Fire Council/RDC Lead Group
Adapt prescribed fire message with “Firewise” message.	2009	GFC Lead Group

**GOAL 7:** Enhance the professionalism of our prescribed fire practitioners. Expedite the transfer of new prescribed fire technology to field use.

OBJECTIVE	TIME FRAME	LEAD ORGANIZATION
Develop and implement a standard code of ethics for all prescribed fire professionals.	2009	Georgia Prescribed Fire Council Lead Group
Initiate a standard prescribed fire planning and execution process.	2010	GFC Lead Group
Initiate a media relations continuing education course as part of GA Prescribed Fire Council meetings.	2010	Georgia Prescribed Fire Council Lead Group
Develop a series of standard prescribed fire prescriptions and products for evaluation.	2010	University of Georgia, TNC, JWJERC, TTRS Lead Group GFC Lead Group
Incorporate a technology transfer session in Georgia Prescribed Fire Council meetings.	2009	Georgia Prescribed Fire Council Lead Group

During the Summit, several barriers were identified as a challenge for continuing prescribed fire in the future. Participants volunteered to work on these barriers and come up with plans to overcome each.

<b>Barrier</b>	<b>Participants</b>
Smoke Management	Greg Findley, Mike Harris, Mark Melvin, Michael Donner, Kevin Robertson, Zachary Prusak, Dave Brownlie, Dale Wade, Frank Cole, Neal Edmondson
Lack of Effective Communication	Lane Green, Mark Melvin, Parks Small, Michael Donner, Nick Wiley, Steve Miller, Frank Cole, Zachary Prusak
Resources are Insufficient	Matt Snider, Mike Harris, Steve Miller, Neal Edmondson, Zachary Prusak
Increasing Urbanization	J. Barrett, Mark Melvin, Bruce Davenport, Kevin Robertson, Dale Wade, Zachary Prusak
Low Organizational Priority	Kevin Robertson, Steve Miller, Zachary Prusak
Lack of Credibility	Dave Brownlie, Michael Donner, Ron Masters
Lack of Seamless Partnerships	Parks Small, Caroline Noble, Steve Miller, Nick Wiley, Zachary Prusak
Lack of Land Managers Incentives	Mike Harris, Charlie King
Takes Too Much Time/New Technology	Caroline Noble
General Assistance	Ron Masters, Dale Wade

## Participants and Affiliations

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## What Is Prescribed Fire

Prescribed fire (Rx fire) is a safe way to apply a natural process, ensure ecosystem health and reduce wildfire risk.

### History

Early American settlers found Native Americans using fire in pine stands and adopted the practice themselves to provide better access, improve hunting, and get rid of brush and timber so they could farm. Annual burning became a custom.

### Reasons to Burn

**Reduce hazardous fuels** - forest fuels accumulate rapidly in pine stands. In five to six years, heavy roughs can build up, posing a serious threat from wildfire to all forest resources. Prescribed fire is the most practical way to reduce dangerous accumulation of combustible fuels under southern pine stands. Wildfires that burn into areas where fuels have been reduced by Rx fire cause less damage and are much easier to control.

**Prepare sites for seeding and planting** - Rx fire is useful when regenerating southern pine by direct seeding, planting, or natural regeneration. On open sites, fire alone can expose adequate mineral soil and control competing vegetation until seedlings become established.

**Improve wildlife habitat** - Rx fire is highly recommended for wildlife habitat management where loblolly, shortleaf, longleaf, or slash pine is the primary overstory species. Periodic fire tends to favor understory species that require a more open habitat. A mixture of burned and unburned areas tends to maximize "edge effect", which promotes a large and varied wildlife population. Deer, dove, quail, and turkey are some of the game species that benefit from Rx fire.

**Manage competing vegetation** - low-value, poor quality, shade tolerant hardwoods often occupy or encroach upon land best suited to growing pines. Unwanted species may crowd out or suppress pine seedlings. In most situations, total eradication of understory is neither practical nor desirable. However, with the careful use of Rx fire the understory can be managed to limit competition with desired species while at the same time providing browse for wildlife.

**Control insects and disease** - brownspot disease is a fungal infection that may seriously weaken and eventually kill longleaf pine seedlings. Once the seedlings become infected, burning is the most practical method of disease control. Any type of burning that kills the diseased needles without killing the terminal bud is satisfactory. Rx fire has been successfully used under very exacting fuel and weather conditions to control cone insects such as the white pine cone beetle, while the pest is overwintering in cones on the ground. Rx burning costs much less than traditional chemical control methods used to control this beetle.

**Improve forage for grazing** - Rx burning improves grazing in open pine stands on the Coastal Plain. Low intensity burns increase availability, palatability, quality, and quantity of grasses and forbs.

**Enhance appearance** - Rx burning improves recreation and aesthetic values. Burning maintains open stands, produces vegetative changes, and increases numbers and visibility of flowering annuals and biennials. Rx burning also maintains open spaces such as mountain balds, and creates vistas.

**Improve access** - burning underbrush prior to the sale of forest products improves the efficiency of cruising, timber marking, and harvesting. The reduced amount of fuel helps offset the greater risk of wildfire during harvesting. Moreover, the improved visibility and accessibility often increases the stumpage value of the product.

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