

# GUIDE TO A SUCCESSFUL PRESCRIBED BURN

## *Rules of Engagement for a Burn Boss*

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With the increasing emphasis and high expectation for getting fire back into fire-dependent ecosystems and because of the level of scrutiny that the public is giving to agency application of prescribed fire, it is timely that we review some fundamental rules of engagement. Adherence to the following should go a long way toward an effective and successful prescribed fire program.

**1. Know your Job:** Internalize, and deliver on ALL of the expectations of your position on the burn team. Revisit your Position Task Book and related documents (PMS-310-1, FSH 5109.17, FSM 5140). As a member of the overhead team for a prescribed fire organization, engage your team members assertively, positively and in an affirmative manner before, during and after project execution. Assure that lines of communication are open and are used frequently within overhead and between overhead and line.

**2. Be Prepared:** As a Burn Boss, well before the burn, review all pertinent plans (Decision Document, Burn Plan and associated project file). Thoroughly brief with the Agency Administrator and Fire Staff. Conduct extensive pre-burn reconnaissance of the project area with Burn Team Overhead (ALL overhead). Visualize with team members the sequence of events (strategy, tactics, contingencies, and support activities) from pre-burn through post burn conclusion of project execution.

**3. Make Haste Slowly:** Do not be rushed...be deliberative and methodical, keeping the safe and successful attainment of resource and operational objectives as a focus.

**4. Listen for the Alarm:** Situational awareness before and during the burn is critical to successful outcomes. Pay attention to any sense of discomfort with organizational, strategic, tactical, and environmental factors before and during project execution. Analyze, make adjustments and DOCUMENT appropriately.

**5. The Burn Plan is a Contract:** It is a contract between a line officer and a Burn Boss. Any modifications require written concurrence from the line officer in the form of an amendment (FSM 5140.32.5). A "pre-work" conference or agency administrator briefing will help clarify expectations. In particular, it is important that the line officer and you as the Burn Boss have a common understanding of what latitude ("minor revisions") you have to make adjustments in the execution of the approved Burn Plan short of requiring a formal amendment. These briefings should be documented.

**6. Do Not Execute a Contingency Plan Before its Time:** A Contingency Plan is developed for an event (fire behavior) that may occur but is not likely to occur. If you expect that the event is likely to occur and it is not covered in the Ignition and Holding sections of the Burn Plan, do not execute the burn until the Plan has been amended and

approved by the Line Officer.

**7. Prescribed Fire is Not a "Pick Up Game":** The public tends to perceive wildfire suppression as a classic, "heroic" endeavor to curb the vagaries of "mother nature". If the fire escapes initial suppression efforts, it can often be explained and accepted as an uncontrollable event (we can still keep our "white hats"). In contrast, a prescribed fire action is not considered by many as a "natural" event. An escape is not well tolerated, nor should it be. The implication of this dichotomy is that our "mindset" and expectation of ourselves should be quite different for implementing a prescribed fire than for a conducting a wildfire suppression action. With the amount of time and effort expended in planning a prescribed burn, there is no need to rush the execution phase (see No. 3 above). To do otherwise is to risk not meeting objectives or worse.

In contrast to a wildfire response, a prescribed fire is where management and the Burn Team pick the time, place, and conditions (see Burn Plan). Like Type 1 and 2 ICTs a Burn Team (module) should be assembled months in advance (not days or weeks) and establish team protocols (SOP's). Rx Burn Modules must take the time to familiarize themselves with planning documents, project area, local terrain, fuel types, weather and other factors well in advance of the burn day. Establishment of local (i.e., Forest or Zone), standing RX Burn Modules is highly recommended (as opposed to a hastily assembled "pickup" team).

**8. Expect Public Scrutiny, Reviews and Investigations to be the Norm:** Expect considerable scrutiny in the event of an escaped prescribed fire. While stressful, formal reviews and investigations are intended to foster accountability and improve performance. If a violation of policy is discovered, expect that questions of conduct will be raised, investigated and evaluated to determine if there was negligence or willful misconduct. However, one of the upsides to this scrutiny is the opportunity to examine and improve upon performance, whether through changes in policy and protocol, adjustments in standards, or training.

**9. Dialogue with the General Public and Interested Stakeholders Early and Often:** Work with, and involve early, your Public Affairs Officer in developing and implementing a communications plan for your project. Ensure you have "one clear voice" delivering consistent, accurate messages. Develop, maintain, and strengthen relationships with Congressional staff, local elected leaders and key community contacts, on a regular basis. Don't wait for a crisis! Develop contingency plans to address issues before they happen!

**10. Surviving an Escape:** Regardless of how well the burn plan was crafted and executed, escapes will happen now and then. The amount of "heat" that the agency will experience will depend on location, who the interested stakeholders are, and the circumstances contributing to the escape. In the face of public and internal scrutiny it is important, at an individual and organizational level that we summon strength from and support for each other in order to stay focused on our work and learn what we can. There will be a post-escape period of self examination that will likely entail organizational as

well as significant personal distress over "mission" failure. Recognize that denial, anger, and rationalization are natural human reactions to a stressful situation. They are a normal part of the process of accepting the experience, identifying its lessons, and internalizing them in order to move on.

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[1] Clark, Loyal F. (PAO), Uinta National Forest – Public Affairs Office, “*Cascade II Prescribed Fire – Lessons Learned*”, January 8, 2004.