

Prescribed fire on private lands: options, opportunities, and myths

Lenya Quinn-Davidson

Area Fire Advisor, University of California Cooperative Extension





Photo by Kat Anderson

Permitted ranch burning in CA 1945-1977

200,000
acres!

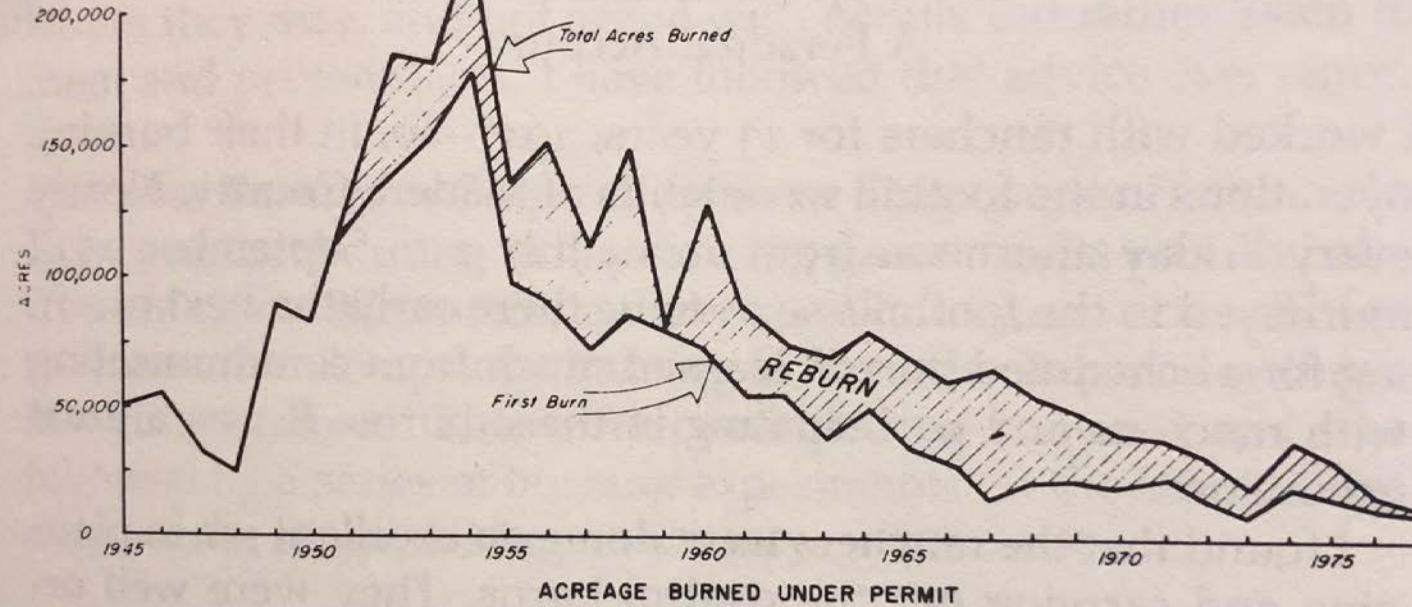
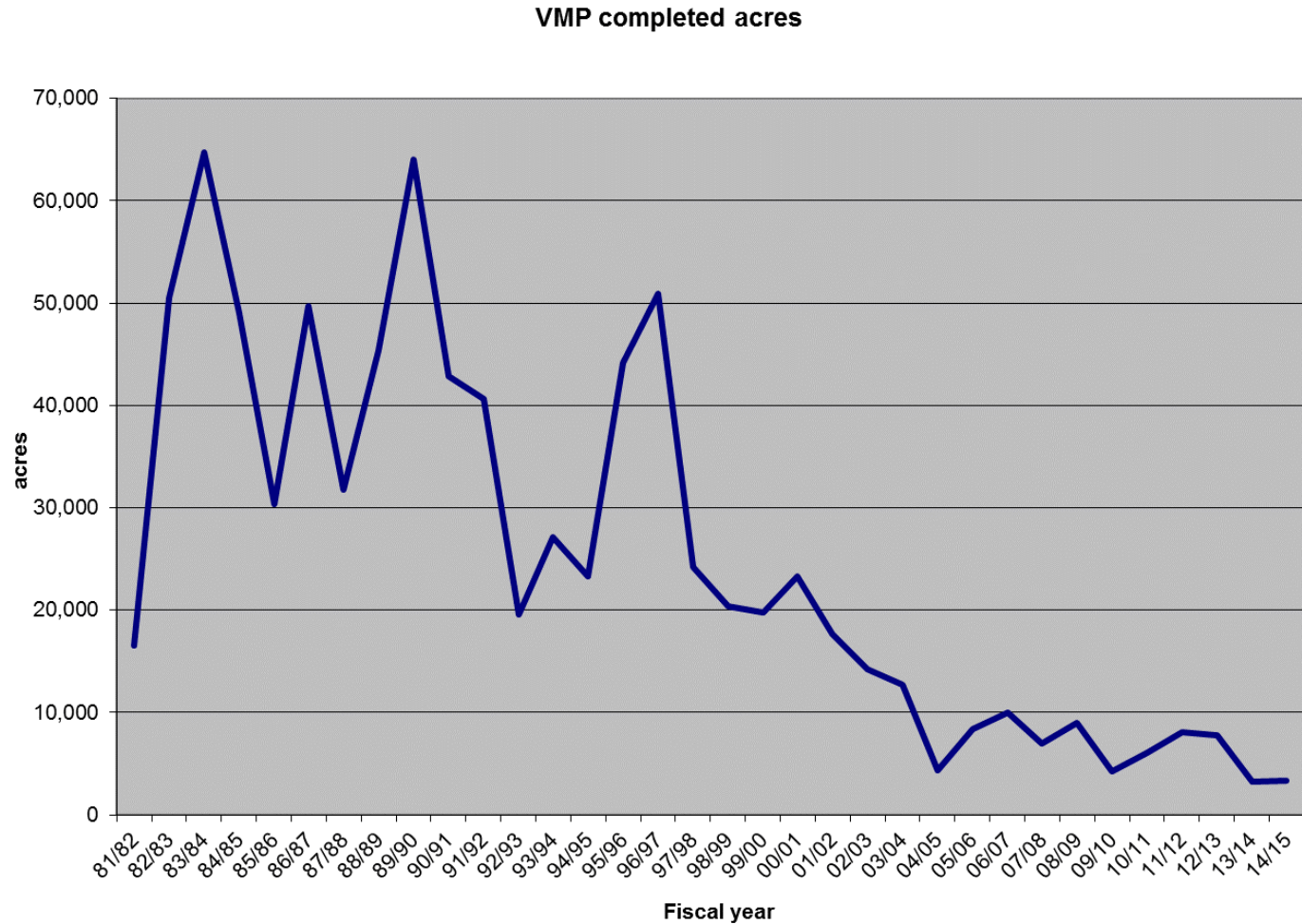
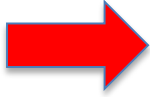


Figure 41. Acreage burned by California ranchers under permit from 1945 to 1977 to reduce fire hazard and improve grazing for livestock and wildlife. (Graph from the California Department of Forestry.)

*From Biswell 1999

CAL FIRE private lands prescribed fire acres, 1981-2015

65,000
acres at
height of
VMP



<10k
acres/year
in last 15
years

Options for private lands burning



VEGETATION MANAGEMENT PROGRAM (VMP)

Pros

- Liability covered by CAL FIRE
- Low cost for landowner
- Experienced crews/resources
- Permits/air quality covered

Cons

- Limited agency capacity
- Planning time/environmental compliance (CEQA)
- Not guaranteed

Options for private lands burning



PRIVATE CONTRACTOR

Pros

- Contractor provides insurance
- Landowner can set expectations and timeframes
- Experienced crews/resources
- Permits/air quality covered

Cons

- Cost!!
- Limited options

Options for private lands burning



DOT IT YOURSELF

Pros

- You're in charge—do it when and how you want
- Low cost
- Environmental compliance

Cons

- Liability
- Manpower/resources
- Permits/air quality

Options for private lands burning

PRESCRIBED BURN ASSOCIATION (PBA)

Pros

- You're in charge—do it when and how you want
- Low cost—volunteer based
- Environmental compliance
- Equipment/labor pooled through PBA
- PBA can apply for grants/funding
- Every burn is a training opportunity

Cons

- Liability (though you can hire a burn boss with insurance)
- Permits/air quality
- Someone has to coordinate

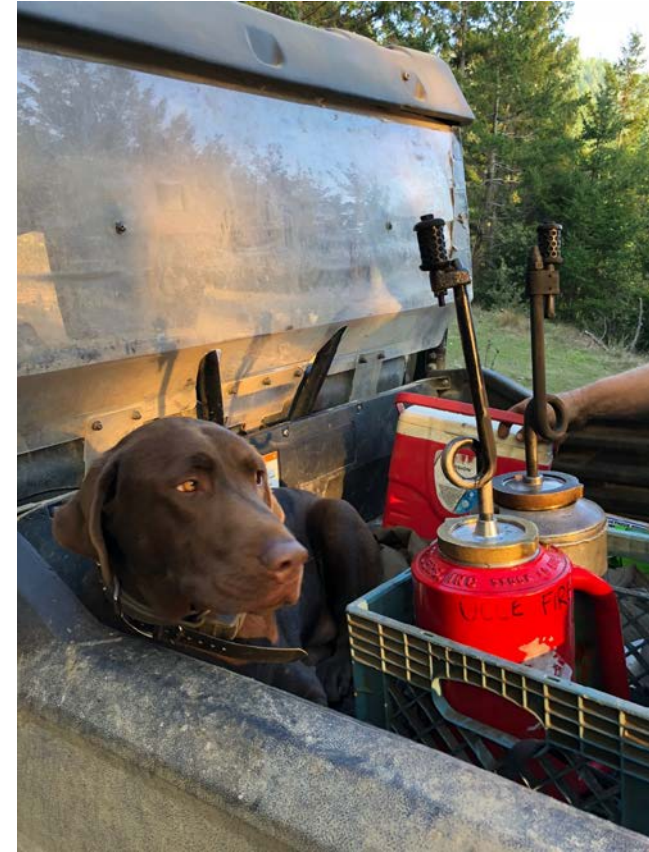


Option	Cost to landowner	Success rate
VMP	Very little...cost of lunch for crews, equipment time for prep	Variable
Private contractor	\$10k per day?	High
Do it yourself	Equipment time/labor	High (small scale only?)
PBA	Equipment time/labor Optional: Burn plan + burn boss (\$1.5-2k)	High

Great Plains PBAs – 2015 survey

- 27 PBAs conducted **1,094 burns covering 472,235 acres** in 8 years
- Only one official report of injury
- Escape rate of 1.5%, with no insurance claims or lawsuits

From Weir et al. 2015





University of California
Agriculture and Natural Resources



Humboldt County Prescribed Burn Association

- Formed March 9, 2018
- Board of Directors & by-laws established
- 80 paying members;
250-person mailing list
- 5,000 acres of projects identified on local ranches and timberlands



Humboldt County Prescribed Burn Association



- Neighbors helping neighbors—similar to old rangeland associations
- VFD involvement + training
- CAL FIRE and air quality support
- Grants and equipment (\$350k+)
- Private burn bosses as needed
- UCCE: research, education, and outreach on burning

Burn trailer!

- California Deer Association donated \$24k in 2017 for purchase of a burn trailer and 3 slip-in units.
- Cal Deer donated another 12k this year for radios + frequency.
- Redwood National Park also donated used hand-tools, hose, and other items



922 acres since June 2017!

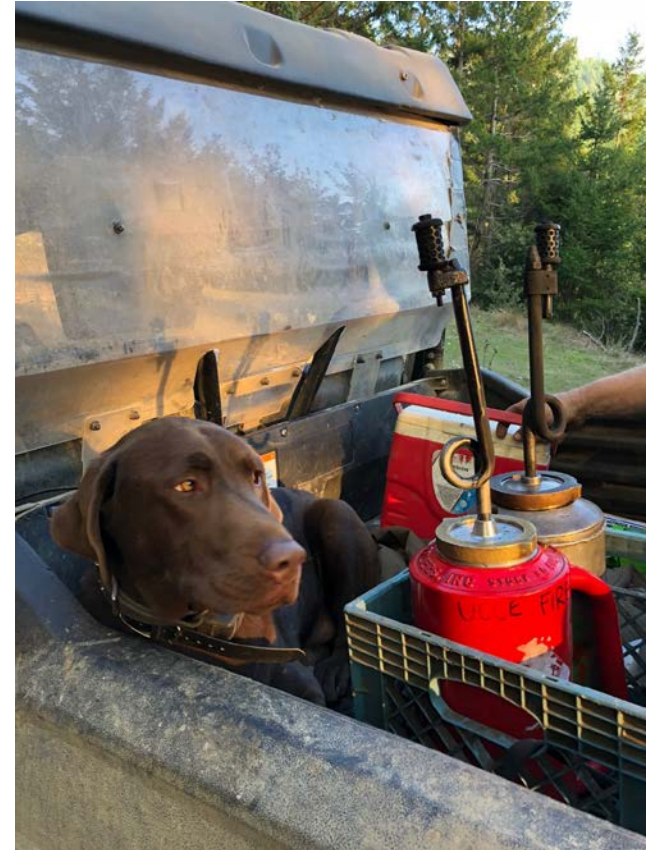


Prescribed fire myths

Liability: “It’s just too risky”

Categories of liability law:

- Strict liability: liable no matter what happens
- Simple negligence: liable if proven negligent
- Gross negligence: must be found grossly negligent to be held liable



Liability: “It’s just too risky”



Mitigate liability:

- Always burn in prescription according to burn plan
- Hire burn boss with insurance
- Fire sometimes covered in farm insurance policies
- Include neighbors and CAL FIRE in project planning
- Start with small, simple units

AB2091: state insurance pool for Rx fire?

SB1260: Following permit parameters = practicing due diligence. Burn boss qualification being developed.

Permits: “Too much red tape”

Only **two permits** needed for Rx fire on private lands:

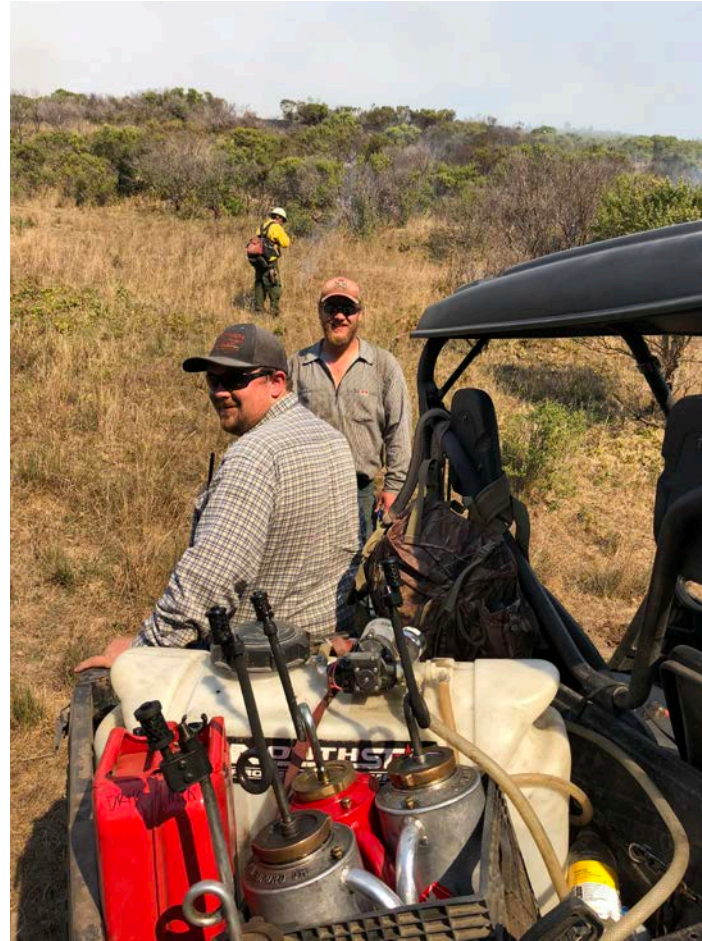
- Year round: air quality permit and smoke management plan (specifics vary by district)
- During fire season (typically ~May 1-Oct. 31): CAL FIRE permit required



Qualifications:

“Only fire experts can conduct burns”

- Everyone is an expert at something
- PBAs leverage diverse skills and resources
- Rebuilding fire culture—fire users don't have to be fire professionals!



Population:

“The public won’t support it”

- Public support for Rx fire is high. Studies consistently show >80-90% approval rates across the country (*McCaffrey et al. 2015*).
- California is ready!
- California has more open space and wildlands than many areas where more burning happens (like the Southeast)

Topography/fuels:
“California is too complex—it’s not like Nebraska or Texas”



Final thoughts

- People have been using fire in California for millennia—time to bring it back again!
- Community capacity and ownership are critical for working toward a meaningful scale.
- Everyone has a role—Rx fire takes all types.



Questions?

Lenya Quinn-Davidson
lquinndavidson@ucanr.edu

(707) 445-7351

