

Prescribed Burn Association Movement in California

Interview with Lenya Quinn-Davidson, Fire Advisor and the Director of UCANR's Fire Network

Interviewer: Jean-Paul Zagarola, BEF

J.P.: Can you tell us about the University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources (UCANR) Fire Network? What is your background and role; and, what brought you there?

LENYA: I've been with UCANR for 12 years, and for most of that time I was a fire advisor based on the north coast of California. I was California's only fire advisor then, which may seem surprising given how much fire we have down here. We have a lot of other people in our system who work on fire related issues either tangentially, or as a bigger part of their program including forest advisors, livestock advisors, public health people,

people across a wide range of expertise and disciplines. But, we didn't have a program that was explicitly focused on fire. Eventually, we received funding from the state of California to build out a statewide fire program within UCANR, and I was asked to direct it. We currently have six fire advisors, including a new advisor here in Humboldt County who is filling my previous position. We also have various other staff and faculty on campus and people who are engaged in this work. You can think of the UCANR Fire Network as our statewide fire extension program. It's meant to inspire and empower people through a combination of research, education

and outreach, policy work, training, and capacity building. We're one of the only entities in California that does all of those things. There are a lot of groups that do fire restoration work, or fire policy or research, but we span that whole spectrum of activities.

J.P.: I imagine you've seen a lot of growth, and there's been a lot of attention put on your program and your role in the last few years.

LENYA: Absolutely. I've worked on fire in California for a little more than 15 years. And for a long time, it wasn't that sexy of a topic. I was always passionate



Honeydew VFD. Photo Credit: Lenya Quinn Davidson

about prescribed fire and restoration of fire as a process, and have been pushing for policy change and capacity building. The people who are involved in prescribed fire work are very passionate and very committed but there wasn't a lot of attention given to that more broadly. I'd say about five years ago, around 2017/2018, things really started changing in California, when we had the wine country fires, the Thomas Fire, Camp Fire, Carr Fire and then later, the Dixie Fire. We've seen so many bad fire seasons that these topics became of more interest and importance to the broader California public. That's when we started seeing legislators wanting to get more involved in advancing this work. The community of practice around prescribed fire really grew at that time, and so have other aspects of fire resilience, like the built environment and home hardening. Those are all issues that our fire network addresses in some way and has expertise in, but my personal passion is around prescribed fire. This space has really exploded in the last five years.

J.P.: The program spans various aspects of wildfire resilience, can you speak a little bit more on the prescribed fire portion, and your experience supporting Prescribed Burn Associations (PBAs)?

LENYA: Prescribed fire is the aspect of this work that I've been most engaged with over the last 15 years. I started out working on this really seriously when I was in grad school at Humboldt State, where I focused on barriers to prescribed fire. I surveyed folks across northern California, trying to identify the top barriers [to prescribed fire], and trying to understand why we weren't doing more of this work. That flowed naturally into the formation of the Northern California Prescribed Fire Council, which I co-founded with Morgan Varner, Will Harling and others in 2009, to start breaking down some of those barriers in California. At that time, it was the first prescribed fire council in the Western US. When the council formed, it really was a foreign concept but what we found was a whole community of practitioners, researchers and regulators who were

very passionate about prescribed fire. The Northern California Prescribed Fire Council gave them a space to convene and to build community. At the time, prescribed fire was being used at a very low level and mostly by federal agencies—the National Park Service, the Forest Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, and to a much smaller extent, some CAL FIRE people, tribes, and some timber companies. The tribal side of prescribed fire was limited at that time, because they had been kept from using fire for so long. I noticed that over the years there was a whole sector of the community who weren't being served by the prescribed fire conversations that were happening, and as an extension person here in the north coast, a lot of my clientele—private landowners, ranchers, Tribal folks—were wondering how to use more prescribed fire, because they understood the value of it, they wanted it. For many of these communities, CAL FIRE was the only pathway to prescribed fire on private land. CAL FIRE had their own program for implementing burns, but it was limited. So, I started exploring



Photo Credit: Jeff Gersh

other opportunities for prescribed fire on private lands and that's how we ended up bringing the PBA model to California.

In 2017, my colleagues and I went out to the Great Plains to try to understand how other places were doing this. In the Great Plains, they're burning hundreds of thousands of acres a year on private land, not with fire professionals, but with community members and landowners. We spent a week in 2017, burning with a couple of PBAs in Nebraska, and decided that we needed to do this in California. We formed the Humboldt County Prescribed Burn Association and started burning on ranches here in Humboldt County, staffed entirely with community members, landowners, volunteer fire departments, and the momentum was pretty incredible. People were hungry for it. People in other parts of California were asking questions like, "What are you doing? Is that legal? Are we allowed to do that?" So, I started working with a lawyer to understand the legality of community based burning. There were some real

questions about permits, seasonality, CAL FIRE's role, CEQA (California Environmental Quality Act) and all of these different things. We launched a public campaign to clarify the legal structure and permitting for prescribed fire and to tell people, "yeah, you have the right to do this in California." It's in state statute that landowners can use prescribed fire on their properties. Over the course of two years I think we did maybe 25 workshops around California, some with demonstration burns. It was almost like a road show inspiring people and opening their minds to new ways of thinking about the work. It was community organizing, really, and it was very successful. Six years later there are 24 prescribed burn associations around the state of California. Not all of them have that name, some of them have different names, like the Plumas Underburn Cooperative, or the Southern Sierra Burn Cooperative, but they're all prescribed burns associations, and they all really came from that time of pushing the boundaries and inspiring people to think differently.

J.P.: How has the relationship been with CAL FIRE as you developed the PBAs?

LENYA: It's been mixed. I think part of the reason that this was able to happen in Humboldt County was because we were able to innovate the approach with a really supportive CAL FIRE unit in the north coast. When we came back from Nebraska in 2017, we already had good relationships and history in my county. I had been working on prescribed fire for a decade at that time, and I had hosted the first TREX in California in this region. There was a lot of support here at the local level. Oh, they were nervous, especially when we did our first PBA style burn in Humboldt in late June for invasive grass control with people in blue jeans and cowboy boots and ball caps, and CAL FIRE's, like, "really?" But it was so successful, safe, and it all went really beautifully. That relationship has only continued to improve and grow and it's been great here at the local level.

At the state level, there have been a lot of hiccups, and especially as some groups in different parts of the state



Photo Credit: Lenya-Quinn Davidson

tried to stand up their own PBAs, CAL FIRE units are not always so receptive. Some units were very resistant and didn't believe that this should be legal even where we did workshops to talk about laws and regulations pertaining to prescribed fire. There were a lot of questions, I think, because they weren't used to permitting private landowners to do burning. However, just because you've never done it doesn't mean it's not allowed.

There was a lot of unexplored potential that we tapped into and it was not without tension and controversy. But the nice thing is, we've gotten to this point where the relationship is really good, and CAL FIRE's current director is very supportive and thoughtful, and a great collaborator. I really like Chief Joe Taylor. I think change is happening and leading to a cultural shift within CAL FIRE.

J.P.: I imagine there's got to be quite a bit of hesitation for an agency that's been working on suppression for so many years. Then, opening up prescribed fire to the community. I'm sure that must have been met with shock in some cases?

LENYA: It definitely was. I think for CAL FIRE folks, their primary interactions with fire are scary. They're putting it out, protecting communities, and they're afraid of people making mistakes that they are going to be responsible for cleaning up. We've now had years of proof of concept and CAL FIRE has come to recognize that people do take a lot of care in this work and that maybe prescribed fire is not that scary. It's not the same as a big wildfire. A lot of CAL FIRE folks don't have a lot of experience with prescribed fire, so their perspectives are coming from the Dixie Fire or from the Carr Fire where they were watching whole communities burn. I understand their trauma and their fear, but that's part of the shift. We're not talking about fire suppression, we're talking about restoring fire, and not being afraid of it. And we're getting there. It's a slow, but steady process.

J.P.: Having successful projects to be able to showcase must be key in that transition. You had mentioned that timber companies were using prescribed fire, could you tell me a little bit about that?

LENYA: When we first formed the Northern California Prescribed Fire Council, we wanted to include timber companies in that conversation. It's not that they were doing a lot of broadcast burning, but timber companies have a history of doing a lot of pile burning, slash burning, and even unit prep burning getting ready to replant. So, fire had long been a tool that timber companies had used, but liability concerns and all the same issues we all deal with [with prescribed fire] had increasingly limited their use of fire. So when we formed the Northern California Prescribed Fire Council, we were thinking of it more holistically and really wanting to invite different kinds of stakeholders. Some of the timber companies are very interested in starting to use fire again. Some of them want to use broadcast burning for ecological reasons like maintaining oak woodlands. We have some pretty progressive timber companies in our area, but I think throughout the state, there's some interest in pile or slash burning. We've always tried to engage timber companies and have the policy solutions that we design also encompass and benefit them, because I think we could all benefit from using more fire.

J.P.: There's clear overlap and incentives to reduce fuels and reduce risks to their marketable timber. I think it's great that they're being included in that conversation and they obviously have a vested interest to participate.

You've written a lot about the barriers to this work. Could you talk about some of the other challenges that you've dealt with in facilitating community based burning?

LENYA: Like you said, this is something I've thought and written about extensively and the barriers have changed over time. Our understanding of them has changed, and as we get deeper into this work, new barriers reveal themselves. I feel like we're at a place where we should stop focusing so much on barriers and think more about where things are really working and what's making that happen. One of the big things that we've worked on in recent years is liability concerns. Most of the liability barrier is really a perception issue, it's about perceived

risk more than actual risk. We know that prescribed burns rarely escape control and even when they do, they most often don't cause any kind of damage. It's an interesting conundrum that there's so much focus on liability when it's really probably not our biggest problem. But that said, perception is reality. We've spent so much time addressing it and we've made huge strides. We changed the liability standard in California through a bill in 2021, and just this last year we rolled out a \$20 million prescribed fire claims fund, which is like a state backed insurance fund for prescribed fire. In both of those cases, we've been able to hold space for cultural practitioners in the same way that we do for federal and state qualified burn bosses. We've been very careful to not create any more bureaucratic hurdles for our Indigenous partners in working on these beneficial fire issues. I'm really proud of our efforts on the liability issue.

J.P.: You mentioned looking at some of the successes. Can you talk a little bit about some of those?

LENYA: I think the Prescribed Burn Association movement in California is so cool and fascinating and really, really promising. There are a lot of different ways each community that has a PBA has taken its own shape and flavor based on who the local community members are and what their priorities are. For example, when I did my research back in 2008 the top barrier to prescribed fire that I published was narrow burn windows. Well, if you start looking at the Prescribed Burn Association model, you start to see that a narrow burn window isn't necessarily the barrier, because you've activated a whole network of community members who are available year round to help with burning. Here in Humboldt County, we have 200 people who are part of our PBA and I could send out an email today and round up 20 to 30 people to burn with me on Sunday. So we, as PBAs, are able to take advantage of pretty much any burn window that presents itself and we don't have people who are on holiday, or people who are in training, or people who are in meetings all day or people who are out on a wildfire. The PBA model is premised on the idea that it's local people living in a place

who know their place and can jump on opportunities as they emerge. [pull quote or bold] Of course, not everyone's going to be available but you have this broad network, whereas a lot of agency burn programs have a handful of people who can do burning and if those folks are out, it's not going to happen. For the Forest Service or for CAL FIRE, narrow burn windows are a big deal because they have to plan well in advance to be able to send a crew out on a prescribed fire, and PBAs are much more nimble. Let's stop talking about those barriers, they're not really useful anymore. I'd say "a narrow burn window, who cares!" What are the ways we can increase our opportunity space? So yeah, the local community based models are really where it's at.

J.P.: That's a sign of a successful researcher/practitioner that says scrap everything I said a couple years ago and focus on this now.

What is your experience working with tribes facilitating cultural burning, and how do PBAs interact with cultural burning and tribes?

LENYA: My personal work with tribes has mostly been in the policy space and a lot of the policy work that I do has been in direct partnership, especially with the Karuk Tribe, but also with some other Tribal partners. We have a regular policy workgroup where we meet often and work together to author bills. We've done so much policy work. All of that liability work has come to be in collaboration with Tribal partners. I have also collaborated on training, like when we hosted the first TREX in California in 2013, in partnership with the Mid-Klamath Watershed Council and the Karuk Tribe. In subsequent years, I've partnered with others like folks from the Yurok Tribe's Cultural Fire Management Council. I'm really lucky here in the North Coast, because we have so many wonderful tribal partners with active burning programs, and we've done quite a bit either together or in parallel.

The PBAs are kind of different depending on where they are. Some are very influenced by Indigenous Knowledge and partnership. The Sierra-Sequoia Burn Cooperative, for example, has a focus on cultural burning and on

Indigenous Stewardship. I also consider the Cultural Fire Management Council (CFMC) a part of our PBA network, given their focus on local (and sometimes family-focused) burning. PBAs are all about local people being able to burn, and so the degree of tribal involvement depends on where you are and who lives there and what tribes are in the area. The Lake County Prescribed Burn Association has a lot of tribal involvement and is led in large part by tribal partners. Here in Humboldt County, we have so many different groups burning—the CFMC, the Karuk Tribe, and the Wailaki people. I see us all pursuing parallel efforts to get as much fire on the ground as possible. I partnered in 2022 with the Karuk Tribe on hosting an Indigenous women's Prescribed Fire Training Exchange, because I am also the program director for the WTREX programs. Tribal involvement in PBAs is kind of across the board and it varies depending on the landscape and the people.

J.P.: Do you have any perspective to share on the opportunities or barriers to promoting this kind of work in Oregon and Washington? Do you look at Oregon and say, "wow, you've got a lot of work to do, and you're going to have to take care of all these things first, before you prepare?

LENYA: I see a lot of opportunities. I feel like Washington and Oregon are always just a short step behind California. For example, California and Washington passed a bill to develop state certified burn boss programs in 2018. We started rolling out our burn boss program, and then they started rolling out theirs. They seem to be learning and watching California to see what works, and then Oregon's kind of right behind that. So, I think that 5-10 years from now, we'll probably all be on the same page. California, for whatever reason, is always just a little bit more in the "trying things out" space. We started the Prescribed Fire Council, and then brought TREX out, and then brought PBAs. We're seeing all of that spill out into Oregon and Washington. So I feel very hopeful and I think there are a lot of similarities. Of course, there are unique differences as well, but nothing that can't be overcome. I think that most of the great work we all do we borrow from other places. I mean we started the Northern California Prescribed Fire Council because we were influenced by Florida, and we were inspired by Nebraska for the PBAs. We shouldn't be too proud to borrow models from other places. We're not that unique. Also, some of the things we think are so challenging about California are actually advantages in some ways, like the perception that our



Photo Credit: Kayla Seaforth

topography is too steep. When you're burning, topography is a leverage point. It's another thing that gives you some control on the fire line, allows you to manage fire behavior and spread. We can reframe the way we think about things and sometimes barriers become opportunities.

J.P.: What does the future look like, where do the opportunities lie, and who would you like to be working with more to push work forward?

LENYA: I hope that in the future fire is in the toolbox of anyone who needs or wants it. And that someone can step outside on a winter morning and feel those leaves crunch under their feet and think “today's a good burn day, I'm gonna burn and not feel completely overwhelmed or confused about how to do that.” [pull quote or bold] We're close to that in a lot of places and that's changed just in a short period of time, just in five years. It's been a remarkable shift.

I also really would like the movement to engage with youth more. We need to be bringing more kids into this work and getting them excited about it. And

then also, different kinds of people. Our WTREX program is focused on diversity and fire, and how we make space for people who have not been represented historically. I really want to see more people of color, more tribal folks, we need everyone involved in this work. I'm trying to create space for all those different kinds of people, whether it's a rancher in a rural area, or a young transgender person, or a couple of five year olds who want to learn more. Why not make space for everyone?

J.P.: After having a recent conversation with Chris Adlam (Oregon State University Extension Regional Fire Specialist), it sounds like you all are conducting a round of surveys for PBAs, and possibly producing a report in the near future? Is there any information you can share about that report?

LENYA: We just completed a national survey of Prescribed Burn Associations. We had somewhere around 80 Prescribed Burn Association leaders from around the country respond to our survey. We're trying to understand the mechanics of PBAs—how they're run, how they're organized, how they started,

what's working, and what they need. The group who administered the survey are all extension people, so we have an interest in how we can better serve these groups and build their capacity. We haven't finished analyzing the results of the survey, but we're hoping to make some kind of briefing papers related to Prescribed Burn Associations so that new landscapes that are looking to start one don't have to start from scratch. Also, we want to help in describing what PBAs are and what they do, especially for an agency and regulator audience, where we can say, PBAs are actually burning hundreds of 1000s of acres. Like these are not cute, it is a real solution, and a real part of the future. That will be unfolding and we will be dealing with all of the analysis and writing over the next six months to a year, but I think we'll have a lot of interesting products from that for different audiences.

J.P.: That's great. There are only two official Prescribed Burn Association currently in Oregon and three in Washington so I think this work will be of high interest to many fire practitioners across the Pacific Northwest interested in community based prescribed fire.



Lenya Quinn-Davidson is the Fire Network Director for the University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources, where she leads a statewide team working on various facets of fire resiliency, from wildland fire management and the built environment to workforce development and community capacity. Over the last 15 years, Lenya's work has focused in large part on the human connection with fire, and increasing the resiliency of California's landscapes and communities. Lenya has worked at various scales, including locally with private landowners and community members; at the state level, where she collaborates on policy, research, and training; and nationally/internationally, through her leadership on the Women-in-Fire Training Exchange (WTREX) Program. Lenya is passionate about using fire to inspire and empower people, from ranchers and scientists to agency leaders and young women, and everyone in between.