

Regular people learn to do prescribed burns

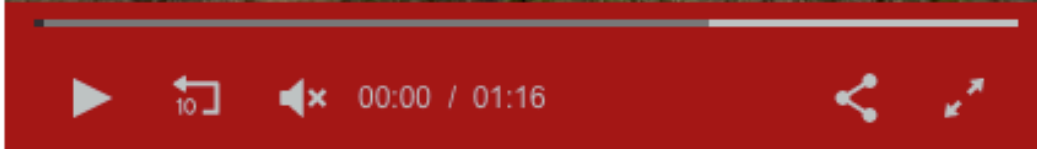
By Vickie Aldous | May 22, 2021 06:00 PM

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Rogue Valley Prescribed Burn Association brings fire to private land

Alexi Lovechio had never been to a prescribed burn before this spring.

But during a recent burn staged by the Rogue Valley Prescribed Burn Association, she walked through the woods using a drip torch to spread flaming drops of fuel on grass and brush.



The association is bringing firefighters, landowners and average people together to carry out carefully planned prescribed burns.

“I was nervous, but when I looked at the fire engines on hand and the hose around the whole perimeter of the burn, I knew the firefighters knew what they were doing,” Lovechio said. “I knew I was in good hands.”

About 30 people showed up each day for prescribed burns April 4 and May 2 in the Applegate Valley. Each burn was about 1.5 acres.

Wildland firefighter Aaron Krikava has long wanted to start a local prescribed burn association. His plans to launch a hands-on group got derailed in 2020 by the COVID-19 pandemic, but he was able to write burn plans and organize the two prescribed burns this spring.

“I think it was really helpful for people,” Krikava said. “We hear all the time about the need for prescribed burning, but for a lot of people, it’s like a black box. They’re not sure what it looks like or how to do it.”



Prescribed burning is common on public property, especially on land under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. But most private landowners don't have the knowledge, equipment or workers to safely carry out prescribed burning on their own property.

The Rogue Valley Prescribed Burn Association was able to get fire engines, hoses, drip torches, firefighters and other resources to carry out the spring burns.

"Professional wildland firefighters were there to guide and instruct people. We enjoy it," Krikava said. "We get to hone our skills and share our knowledge. Prescribed burning needs to be done for firefighter, home and personal safety."

Applegate Valley landowner Rich Fairbanks was one of two property owners to offer the use of his land for a prescribed burn.



Retired from the Forest Service, Fairbanks is familiar with controlled burns and wildland firefighting because of his career. He bought land in the Applegate Valley in 2003 and started thinning the woods. That set the stage for him to regularly start low intensity prescribed burns that creep along the forest floor, consuming poison oak, pine needles, grass, brush and saplings.

When weather conditions are right, Fairbanks strings out his hoses and gets other safety gear in place to carry out what he calls micro-burns. They usually measure about 100 feet by 100 feet.

With more hands available through the Rogue Valley Prescribed Burn Association, he was able to carry out the 1.5 acre burn this spring. Fairbanks would like to see the association tackle other rural properties.



“Most private land needs to be underburned, but you usually can’t do it unless you can apply a lot of manpower,” he said. “My great hope is that there could be a labor exchange. With the prescribed burn association, we can do that. I could give time to my neighbor, and he could help me.”

The dozens of people who visited Fairbanks’ land this spring got plenty of before-and-after views of prescribed burns. They could see the forest floor sporting a new carpet of greenery and wildflowers that sprouted after small burns he carried out in February and March. The prescribed burn they helped tend left behind a blackened surface, but not for long.

Chris Adlam, southwest Oregon regional fire specialist with the Oregon State University Extension Service, said landowners are more familiar with pile burning than prescribed burning. They cut trees and vegetation, drag debris together in a pile, then light a match.



Pile burning doesn't have the same ecological benefits as prescribed burning, which cleans up small, scattered fuels like pine needles, Adlam said.

Some tree species in the area, including Ponderosa pine, benefit from low-intensity fires that spread across the forest floor, killing off small rivals and returning nutrients to the soil. The thick bark and high branches of Ponderosa pines make them naturally fire resilient.

Adlam said flames and embers from burn piles can escape, forcing firefighters to rush to the scene to stop blazes. Prescribed burning can be more safe than burn piles if done with the right safety measures, including a burn plan, hoses, fire engines on standby and people to help.



“If you can get all those people together through a community-based approach, you can pull off these prescribed burns over large areas. They’re much more effective than burn piles,” Adlam said. “It’s inspiring to see people coming together and solving problems together by sharing knowledge and resources and labor.”

By helping out at the two prescribed burns this spring, Lovechio said she learned it takes a great deal of knowledge and effort to make a burn plan. Everything has to be considered, from the characteristics of the property to the weather conditions the day of the burn.

On burn day, people carry out a range of roles, from using drip torches to light a line of fire to carefully monitoring the perimeter of the burn.

“I feel like I finally have on-the-ground knowledge of what it takes,” Lovechio said.



Ashland resident Laura Montoya also helped with the prescribed burning this spring. At first, she was part of the holding team that stays on the perimeter to watch for any flames breaking through.

“It’s the most boring job, but it’s the most important job,” she said.

Then she was offered the chance to use a drip torch — with more experienced people guiding her along.

“It felt really comfortable,” Montoya said. “Doing it with so much protection and science, I thought, ‘Wow! This is so beautiful — both visually and knowing that it was helping the forest.’”

The Rogue Valley Prescribed Fire Association has finished with prescribed burns for the spring due to conditions becoming hot and dry. But people interested in learning about the association and joining in future efforts can email Krikava at aaronkrikava@yahoo.com.