



# From Grassroots to National Alliance: The Emerging Trajectory for Landowner Prescribed Burn Associations

By John R. Weir, Dirac Twidwell, and Carissa L. Wonkka

## On the Ground

- Due to woody plant encroachment and seeing the need for fire on their lands, private landowners throughout the southern Great Plains have started forming prescribed burn associations (PBA) to assist each other with conducting prescribed fires.
- Members of PBAs work together by pooling equipment and other resources, organizing training opportunities, and assisting with prescribed burns on each other's properties, while teaching upcoming generations and inexperienced members the value of fire in grassland conservation and how to safely use it.
- There are over 50 PBAs working in the southern Great Plains. As the number of PBAs has grown so has the need for bringing these groups together. Oklahoma, Texas, and Kansas have formed statewide PBAs to assist and promote the local PBAs.
- As PBAs have grown in number, there is now a clear opportunity to develop an organized network of PBAs at the local, state, and national levels that can address cross-scale ecological and jurisdictional challenges limiting their effectiveness.

**Keywords:** cross-scale dynamics, fire risk, landowner cooperative, landowner survey, prescribed fire.

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was started by small groups of landowners operating independently across several states to address the woody plant encroachment problem threatening the productivity and diversity of Great Plains rangelands.<sup>1,2</sup> Almost simultaneously, the first prescribed burn associations (PBAs; also referred to as prescribed burn cooperatives) were formed in Nebraska (ca. 1995), Texas (ca. 1997), and shortly thereafter in Oklahoma (ca. 2001) with a solitary objective—to overcome the traditional constraints limiting the application of prescribed fire on rangelands.<sup>3</sup>

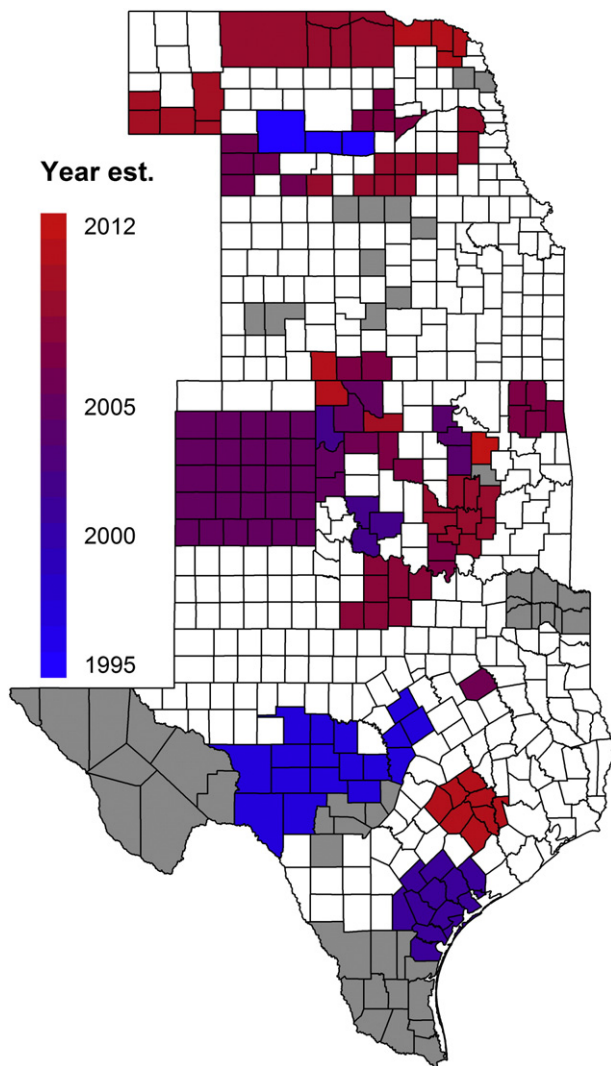
The success of the PBA concept has allowed it to spread and become adopted by landowners in new areas (a 2012 county-level map is presented in Figure 1; summary information on PBA activities are given in Tables 1 and 2). Fifty PBAs are now active in the Great Plains and the number is growing. PBAs have now expanded into Illinois, Missouri, Louisiana, and Mississippi. Additional states are also considering if the PBA concept can help landowners to better meet natural resource objectives. We have been contacted by, and spoken with, interested stakeholders in Florida, Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, North Carolina, Iowa and Montana.

As PBAs have grown in number, there is now a clear opportunity to develop an organized network of PBAs at local, state, and national levels that can address cross-scale ecological and jurisdictional challenges. In this paper, we discuss how an organizational framework operating across spatial scales can benefit PBAs. We include current scales of impact, as well as opportunities for PBAs to have an impact at larger scales (Fig. 2). We include: 1) specific case examples highlighting current PBA organizational strengths and weaknesses, 2) insights from our years of experience working directly with PBA members across multiple states, and 3) results from a recently completed survey of PBAs across the Great Plains.

## A Cross-Scale Framework for PBAs

Mounting evidence indicates that cross-scale considerations are needed to strategically address dynamics and issues relevant to an individual landowner, a group of landowners, privatized alliances or even resource management agencies. Cash et al.<sup>4</sup> define cross-scale as “interactions across different

Since the mid-1990s, a grassroots movement has been occurring where landowners have formed localized cooperative associations to restore fire across rangeland ecosystems of the United States. The movement



**Figure 1.** County-level map and year of establishment for the 50 PBAs located from Nebraska to Texas in 2012 (year of establishment was not be determined for gray colored counties).

scales, for example, between spatial domains and jurisdictions.” Those considering cross-scale interactions in today’s complex social-ecological systems are more successful at problem assessment and identifying political and ecological solutions to those problems.<sup>4</sup> If PBAs are to successfully address the myriad of sociopolitical and biophysical challenges operating across a range of scales (from local to national) that restrict landowner use of prescribed fire, then PBAs need to grow from formal networks at local scales to also include state, regional, and national alliances and linkages. Some states have already started moving in this direction and there is growing potential for a national network of PBAs. In this section, we discuss this emerging cross-scale structure and how it has the potential to benefit PBA activities and goals. Our emphasis here is for readers to see the cross-scale issues and interactions that occur at various scales, and to therefore demonstrate the importance of moving toward an organizational framework that can account for cross-scale interactions relevant to landowner use of fire.

## PBAs at the Local Level

Local PBAs provide an important network among individuals within a community that are having difficulty conducting prescribed burns by themselves. Members of the local PBA pool equipment and other resources, organize training opportunities, and help conduct prescribed burns on each other’s properties.<sup>1</sup> The local PBA also creates opportunities to teach future generations and inexperienced members the value of fire in grassland conservation and how to control it.<sup>2</sup> The success or failure of these PBAs begin at the community level and are dependent on several elements. We provide some examples here.

For a PBA to be effective within the community, it needs good local leadership. Leadership can come from the landowners, the local agency personnel providing technical assistance to the PBA, or both. In the absence of good leadership, or in the event of the sudden loss of leadership, PBAs can go from being very active to having minimal participation. This reveals a major weakness in the long-term sustainability of prescribed fire under the current local-PBA approach and shows where support from a state or regional level group can possibly help the local PBA avoid this problem. As a prime example, leadership in one PBA included two local ranchers and a USDA-National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) employee with a lot of burn experience who provided the group with much needed technical assistance. This PBA was very active conducting burns and promoting prescribed fire in the area. Their success was so well perceived that people from other areas asked them for assistance to form new PBAs. Their accomplishments were also documented in several regional and national popular press publications. Then, the NRCS employee took another position, and a short time later one of the ranchers passed away. This left a void in leadership and coordination that certain people bring to a group, and the PBA has yet to recover from this change. Because no one stepped up to fill these positions the membership has dwindled, the number of burns conducted has dropped off drastically, and the PBA’s sphere of influence has gone from five to two counties. Due to issues like this the statewide burn association has hired regional coordinators to work with local PBAs that are new or lacking in leadership to keep them active and functional.

In the presence of strong leadership and member support PBAs have been able to overcome negative circumstances or events at local levels. For example, the Edwards Plateau Prescribed Burn Association (EPPBA) in Texas, which was formed in 1997 with 30 members, now works in 14 counties with over 350 members. As of 2012, the EPPBA has conducted over 300 burns on over 150,000 acres (60,703 ha). They have received numerous grants and donations, as well as the Texas Environmental Excellence Award, given to the state’s most outstanding environmental projects. Yet, early on, the EPPBA was confronted with a claim from a local business that the EPPBA had conducted a fire that had escaped and burned some of the businessman’s property. After several PBA members and other individuals looked at the prescribed fire and the weather conditions of the day, along with the

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