

The Del Norte Prescribed Burn Association Needs You!

March 14, 2025



In August of 2023, electrical storms sparked numerous wildfires throughout Oregon and California, with 150 ignitions in Del Norte County alone. For the next three months, the Smith River Complex burned through 95,000 acres of the Smith River National Recreation Area and adjacent private lands.'

Hot down-canyon winds, below-average precipitation, thicket-like Douglas-fir plantations, and a century of fire suppression fueled high-severity runs down canyons, up gullies, and across slopes. The Complex closed state highway 199, shut off power to Del Norte County, and triggered evacuation orders as it burned toward Gasquet. Federal agencies, the Tolowa Dee-ni' Nation, the Del Norte Fire Safe Council (DNFSC), and the Smith River Alliance (SRA) were working to complete hazardous fuel reduction around the towns of Gasquet and Big Flat under the CalFire Wildfire Prevention Grants Program-California Climate Initiatives (CCI)-Gasquet Community Protection Project and Big Flat Community Protection Project-funded by Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership.

Would these be enough to save the town? Back-burning operations ensued and conditions improved just enough before these were put to the test. As the smoke cleared amid soaking autumn rains, folks knew it was just a matter of when (not if) the next fire would come. Increasing the pace and scale of community wildfire preparedness was job one.

Local fire safe councils were developed to empower, educate, and mobilize communities to live safely with wildfire. To foster collaboration between agencies and provide a voice for residents, CalFire funds a coordinator for each California county. In Del Norte, the County Coordinator is Aaron Babcock, who advances a mission to foster fire-resilient communities by empowering residents through education, training, and boots-on-the-ground projects, while hiring local workers to implement large-scale mitigation projects nearer to communities. He oversees wildfire mitigation efforts, including fuels reduction, prescribed fire planning, home risk assessments, and defensible space projects. As a local resident, he recognizes the unique communities and ecosystems in Del Norte.

To most effectively reduce fire risk, projects are tackled with local involvement and knowledge. This empowers residents to take ownership of these efforts and provides well-paying jobs for people who live here. In a rural county like Del Norte, where communities are surrounded by forests and fire-dependent ecosystems, proactive wildfire mitigation is essential. Unlike urbanized areas to the south, this landscape provides an opportunity to reintroduce beneficial fire as a tool for resilience and protection.

To that end, DNFSC launched the Del Norte Prescribed Burn Association (PBA). The council offers assistance with permits, burn plans, expert advice, oversight, and access to specialized equipment, tools, and safety gear. Although born from the DNFSC, the PBA is self-directed and will take on a life of its own. Its long-term goal is to empower local communities to reclaim fire as a tool for protecting their homes, strengthening their neighborhoods, and restoring the health and resilience of the land. By working together, residents can take ownership of fire's role in the landscape, using it as past generations did—to sustain, protect, and renew. With thoughtful planning and collaboration, burns become impactful community events where all—from seasoned professionals to first-time participants—play a role. Rooted in time-honored lessons

from Indigenous people, fire practitioners, and a broader community of experts who have successfully conducted thousands of burns, the Del Norte PBA follows a stepwise approach:

- 1) Site Visit- DNFSC / PBA professionals visit a property to determine suitability, understand landowner goals and expectations, and discuss necessary preparations.
- 2) Preparation- Advance work is conducted to ensure that burning can be done safely and will meet property owner expectations.
- 3) Mapping and Burn Plans- The burn unit is mapped, a burn plan is developed, and appropriate permits are obtained.

4) Good Fire- The PBA puts fire on the ground, carefully coordinating with appropriate agencies and adhering to the burn plan to maximize beneficial outcomes.

The Del Norte PBA is actively recruiting new members. Membership is free with no experience or qualifications required. Members receive invites to upcoming burns and PBA trainings, like a Prescribed Fire Community Workshop in the South Fork Smith River watershed (April 25-27, 2025). By joining, you will have access to the tools, training, and expert support needed to conduct burns safely and effectively on your own property. Whether you are looking to reduce wildfire risk, restore habitat, or improve land health, the PBA provides the knowledge and resources to help. To join, sign up for email alerts, and learn more about the PBA, please visit- <https://www.delnortefsc.org/pba>.