



ATC Conservation and Trail Management Policy Prescribed Burns

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The Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), a §501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, works closely with Appalachian Trail volunteer maintaining clubs (“Clubs”) and other public and private partners to ensure the protection and stewardship of the natural, cultural, and experiential resources of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail (known as ANST, A.T., or “the Trail”). Approximately fifty federal, state, or other public agencies have authority or jurisdiction over lands and resources within the protected A.T. corridor. ATC has a central management role by virtue of its Cooperative Agreement with the USDI National Park Service and its close working partnership with the USDA Forest Service and other agencies.

ATC's Trail management and conservation policies are meant to provide guidance for (a) dissemination to the public; (b) use and implementation by the ATC and the Clubs; and (c) recommendations for land-managing and other agencies. It is the agencies who work within their defined procedures to propose, administer, and enforce public policy. ATC policies are recommendations developed to support appropriate, coordinated Trailwide management.

Overview

The purpose of this guidance is to assist Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) staff and Appalachian Trail maintaining clubs in their interactions with land managers who engage in prescribed burns along the A.T. Management Corridor. By doing so, ATC hopes to ensure a consistent approach when working with the range of land-managing partners and that Trail values are incorporated into decision-making by prescribed-burn managers. This policy will be included in state and local Appalachian Trail Management Plans and discussed with state and local partners in a proactive manner, well-before prescribed burns are being planned.

Background

Historically, natural, lightning-ignited fires occurred three to five times per decade in certain areas of the Appalachian region. From the 1950s until 2000, improved backcountry firefighting successfully suppressed wildfires. More recently, however, lightning; human carelessness, and excess unburned fuel from decades of well-intended but zealous suppression have led to hard- to-control blazes and fire-adapted ecosystems becoming out of balance. In 2016, more than 50 major wildfires spread through eight Appalachian Trail states, burned more than 40,000 hectares, and led to 14 deaths. The fires, which were more aggressive and more difficult to contain than usual, even produced smoke visible from space.

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Land-management agencies have learned that purposefully bringing limited fire to Appalachian forests can help restore ecological balance and reduce damage to human settlements caused by uncontrolled wildfires.

Undoubtedly, there will be continued, and possibly increased, interest in conducting prescribed, controlled burns proximate to the A.T. for a variety of reasons—e.g., fuel reduction, habitat enhancement for species of concern, wildlife habitat, and to improve forest regeneration.

Given the unique character and partnership management structure of the A.T., special considerations need to be taken into account. Procedures for prescribed controlled burns near the A.T. are outlined below, providing guidance to A.T. clubs, staff, and partners. These procedures establish parameters to ensure optimal utilization and implementation of prescribed burns within the A.T. management corridor.

Policy

Guidance for Clubs, Partners, Local Management Plans, and State Memoranda of Agreement

Taking the above issues into consideration, the following procedures should be taken into account when A.T. club members and ATC staff are working with land-management agencies on proposed prescribed burning plans:

1. A prescribed burn within the Appalachian Trail Management Corridor should be undertaken only when doing so will benefit the A.T. and analysis of resource management objectives indicates that it is the most suitable option. The approach to each prescribed burn should consider the potential impacts to the visitor experience and A.T. viewshed and environment. A prescribed burn may not be compatible with Trail values under certain conditions. Those conditions may include: increasing the possibility of undue risk to Trail users; extensive impacts to Trail views over the long term; high risk to species of concern not protected by Adaptive Management Strategies; insufficient resources to address burn follow-up; and inability to achieve prescriptive conditions within a timeframe that is compatible with generally low Trail use. Prescribed fires in lands managed for the A.T. should enhance A.T. resources and experience.
2. Early, close, and ongoing dialogue is necessary among ATC, the local Trail-maintaining Club, APPA, and the land manager. Communications should start during planning, continue through execution, and remain strong through restoration to ensure optimal natural and cultural resource conditions.

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3. An ATC natural-resource specialist should be involved throughout the fire planning process, including the decision to undertake a controlled burn. ATC regional staff should work with land-managing agency partners on the details of the planned burn, including size of the planned burn, and special considerations for hikers and the A.T. environment in the burn.
4. Ideally, prescribed burns should be scheduled to the maximum extent possible during low Trail usage periods while considering other environmental impacts (e.g., nesting behaviors and air quality). To prevent problems, early notification of Trail maintainers and long- distance hikers along the length of the Trail is required using a variety of media. The burn should be planned to disrupt Trail usage the minimum length of time possible.
5. Once a decision is made to conduct a prescribed burn, the Fire Management Plan should be shared with A.T. clubs and ATC and include the following components:
 - a. Management objectives of the burn.
 - b. Plans for post-burn monitoring and management.
 - c. Notification procedures to burn when prescription parameters are met, including sufficient notification with maximum lead time to ATC and the local Trail maintaining Club.
 - d. Plans to protect, mitigate, and restore damage to Trail infrastructure such as shelters, privies, bridges, and waterbars.
 - e. Communication of details of the burn scheduling, the rationale for the burn, Trail closures, means of avoiding the burn area, and emergency procedures to ATC, the public, the local Trail maintaining club, and Trail users prior to the prescribed burn through multiple media.
 - f. In collaboration with ATC and the local club, alternative means of getting around the burn area for hikers must be identified, and hiker and other user communication plan identified.
6. To the greatest degree possible, fire breaks and control lines should strive for minimum natural- and cultural-resource impact:
 - a. Avoid use of heavy equipment (e.g., bulldozers and plows) to the greatest extent possible. Blown or hand-cleared control lines should be used instead of mechanically constructed or chemically created firebreaks.
 - b. Use natural and existing barriers and previously cleared areas (e.g., roads, streams, and bodies of water) whenever possible and minimum-impact options for

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control lines.

c. No new roads or tracks should be created.

d. Fire-ignition plans should be designed to minimize damage/risk to the A.T. and infrastructure as much as possible.

e. Minimize slash within sight of Trail.

f. Minimizing erosion from all fire lines is critical. Water bars, native species seeding, and other erosion-control devices should be used where necessary.

g. Minimize soil compaction, clearing, and scraping by defining boundaries using existing roads, trails, or other barriers.

h. Avoid placing fire breaks in sensitive areas, such as wetlands, marshes, and areas with rare, threatened, and endangered species. Avoid chemical fire retardants if at all possible.

i. Minimize the proportion of watershed burned when possible.

j. Avoid tapping local water sources to extinguish flames where withdrawals or access for withdrawals presents risks or potential damage to aquatic habitats.

7. Post-burn activities:

a. To reach ecological objectives, including nonnative invasive species, close monitoring and management should be conducted for up to five years. The agency conducting the burn should adhere to the specific management goals and monitoring timeline of the Fire Management Plan. ATC and, where capacity exists, local Trail maintaining clubs, will help monitor post-burn management.

b. Where necessary, reseed firelines with local native species.

c. Avoid using plastic netting to protect rehabilitation areas.

d. Return all fire lines to preexisting condition as soon as feasible, especially those that might be mistaken for trails.

e. Remove all signs of human intervention (flagging tape, foil, litter) after the burn.

f. Restore roads to a pattern of use prior to controlled burn.

For questions related to this policy please contact the Appalachian Trail Conservancy at www.appalachiantrail.org, or P.O. Box 807, Harpers Ferry, WV, 25425-807.

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy's mission is to protect, manage, and advocate for the Appalachian National Scenic Trail.