

**CSAC 2019 Challenge Award Nomination  
Humboldt County  
Using Prescribed Fire to Build Resiliency**

**Category:  
Agriculture, Environment & Natural  
Resources**

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**Overview:** Humboldt County is leading the West with its prescribed fire program, making the county more resilient to wildfire and inspiring similar action throughout the state.

**Challenge:** In the last decade, it has become increasingly clear that California simultaneously suffers from too much fire and not enough protection. The frequency and scale of catastrophic wildfires have grown at seemingly exponential rates, with four of the state's largest and most damaging fires happening in the last 2 years. At the same time, California's ecosystems are struggling in the absence of their natural fire regimes, becoming overgrown, outcompeted, and unhealthy. In this context, landowners and land managers are desperate to regain control, attain some balance, and develop a safer and more meaningful relationship with fire.

**Solution:** Prescribed fire—the use of fire to meet specific management objectives—has been elevated as one of the best ways to restore fire-adapted ecosystems and protect communities and natural resources, but landowners and community members have largely lacked access to prescribed fire information and training—until now. Since 2016, Lenya Quinn-Davidson and Jeffery Stackhouse, University of California Cooperative Extension Advisors, have been developing a program to build capacity for prescribed fire on private lands in Humboldt County. They've also been able to highlight Humboldt County as a model for other counties throughout California.

**Innovation:** In the last two years, they have hosted 26 workshops and 15 live-fire trainings in Humboldt and throughout the state, given 86 presentations, fostered strong partnerships with CAL FIRE and other agency partners, and piloted an innovative model for private lands burning by forming the Humboldt County Prescribed Burn Association (PBA)—a local cooperative of landowners, non-profits, volunteer fire departments, and other community members who work together to implement projects on private lands throughout Humboldt County. These prescribed fire projects have reduced hazardous fuels, restored habitat, and addressed invasive species issues throughout Humboldt County.

**Results:** The Humboldt County PBA is the first of its kind in the West, and the first PBA to maintain an explicit focus on diversity, volunteer fire department capacity, and member training. Over the last two

years, Lenya and Jeff have brought more than \$300,000 in grants to Humboldt County for training and equipment, and they've also treated more than 900 acres with prescribed fire and provided live-fire training to 13 rural fire departments and 355 community members. For more than half of those people, these trainings were their first experience with live fire, and many fire department staff said it was the best training they've ever had. Landowners have also noted clear ecological benefits from the burns.

**Replicability:** This work has been successful not only because it provides quality training and education, but also because of its focus on empowering landowners and others to reconnect with fire as a management tool. Many decades of fire suppression have effectively taken fire out of the private lands toolbox and created a culture of fear and powerlessness. The work in Humboldt County has started to reverse those trends, and it has catalyzed major interest and change in California and throughout the West. Along these lines, Lenya and Jeff have been invited to counties across the state to speak about the Humboldt County model and to share ideas and inspiration. As a result, new PBAs are sprouting up throughout California: first in Sonoma and Plumas counties in late 2018, with more recent interest in Santa Barbara, Mendocino, Butte, Nevada, Tehama, Placer, Shasta, Siskiyou, and San Benito counties. It is clear that the innovative model set forth in Humboldt County is relevant and replicable in other regions, and Humboldt County has been able to pave a path for further action with Lenya and Jeff leading the charge. In late June 2019, the two will host a week-long training in Humboldt County, where 20 prospective PBA leaders from throughout California will join them for workshops and burning in various parts of the county. The goal is to bolster other counties' efforts, and provide them with the hands-on skills, organizational tools, and passion for the work that have served Humboldt County so well. With another fire season on the horizon, the work in Humboldt County—and the ripples it's sending statewide—could not be more timely or more critical.

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