Almost all Southeastern upland systems, as well as some types of wetlands, have been shaped and maintained by periodic fire. Decades of fire suppression have degraded these systems and have changed the human perception of fire and its role on our landscape. Prescribed fire serves as a crucial management tool to restore and maintain these habitats, and its use is a critically important issue in the Southeast.

This Communications Strategy proposes that the East Gulf Coastal Plain Joint Venture (EGCPJV) assume the role of prescribed fire champion by focusing its coordination, outreach and partnership activities through the lens of prescribed fire - a process vital to the ecological health of the natural communities that support birds and wildlife diversity. This document is strategic, providing a comprehensive framework of prescribed fire issues and messages within which the EGCPJV will further identify priority actions. The “niche” of the EGCPJV with respect to prescribed fire is to focus on fire’s ecological benefits to wildlife, specifically birds, and provide wildlife-focused education and outreach materials to key audiences.

This strategy builds upon the unique strengths of the EGCPJV Management Board and staff, which lend themselves to achieving prescribed fire goals. It was developed over the course of several months based upon information provided in interviews of ~45 prescribed fire/resource management experts throughout the East Gulf Coastal Plain, as well as guidance from the EGCPJV staff and board members concerning their mission, strengths and appropriate roles in promoting prescribed fire.

**East Gulf Coastal Plain Joint Venture Mission**
The mission of the EGCPJV is to protect and restore bird populations of the East Gulf Coastal Plain by coordinating the effective conservation of key habitats.

**Communications Vision for Prescribed Fire**
The EGCPJV’s vision for prescribed fire in the Southeast is to maintain and restore fire regimes through an increased use and acceptance of prescribed fire, since fire has historically and evolutionarily played a critical role in the health of East Gulf Coastal Plain upland systems and marshes. Specifically, communications and partnerships will increase the safe use of prescribed fire to restore, improve and sustain the ecosystem health of fire-dependent systems such as shortleaf and longleaf pine, mixed pine woodlands, oak woodlands and savannas, native warm season grasses and distinct climax grasslands such as the Black Belt Prairies of Mississippi/Alabama and Big Barrens of Kentucky/Tennessee.
Communications Goals & Approach

1. POLICY GOAL: Support and advocate the establishment and/or strengthening of laws, policies, budgets and regulations required to consistently allow, promote and apply prescribed fire across the Southeast.

2. OUTREACH GOAL: Foster the adoption and increased application of prescribed fire among East Gulf Coastal Plain (EGCP) resource program and management communities by providing science-based information and training focused on fire’s ecological, wildlife, and habitat benefits. Include a focus on recruitment and training of professionals and consultants to increase overall capacity for conducting prescribed burns.

3. EDUCATION GOAL: Promote an increased societal awareness of and demand for safe, science-based application of prescribed fire in support of community safety and ecological health. In particular, focus on training for landowners to achieve fire capacity and application at a large scale.

Recommended Communications Strategies

Many of the experts consulted across all six of the EGCP states recommended the following approaches for developing and disseminating Joint Venture communications:

1. In addition to nonprofit partners currently on the EGCPJV Board, collaborate with the state Prescribed Fire Councils, the Southern Fire Exchange, the Oak Woodlands and Forests Fire Consortium, and possibly the Joint Fire Science Program and the Coalition of Prescribed Fire Councils.

2. Coordinate action and communications on prescribed fire among Joint Ventures with similar issues in the Southeast; continue collaboration with the Gulf Coastal Plains & Ozarks LCC particularly with respect to landscape scale planning and goals.

3. Collaborate and stay in contact with the SERPPAS Prescribed Fire Work Group and the Southeast Regional Strategy Committee of the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy.

Areas of Opportunity for the EGCPJV

The EGCPJV, working with Prescribed Fire Councils, Joint Ventures, the forestry community and other partners, is poised to contribute significantly to the rebirth of prescribed fire in key areas throughout the Southeast by focusing efforts in the following three “value-added” areas:

1. Planning and outreach about prescribed fire in shortleaf pine, pine-oak, oak woodlands, and grasslands/prairie systems. (Continue to collaborate, support and learn from longleaf pine initiatives.)

2. Developing and providing science-based information on the wildlife (especially bird) benefits of prescribed fire.

3. Developing and promoting the concept of fire landscapes for birds (and other wildlife).
Impediments to Prescribed Fire
The impediments to prescribed fire are well known and well documented and often affect public and private lands quite differently. All of these factors contribute to increased difficulty in achieving prescribed fire at scales sufficient to provide desired ecological benefits.

- Capacity, which has three components - knowledge (particularly through direct experience), equipment and manpower - affects the ability to burn on both public and private lands, and can be a barrier to entry for landowners new to the use of prescribed fire.
- Liability concerns, stemming from reduced visibility on roadways or fire escape, arise due to lack of confidence in legal protections for prescribed burning and the high cost of insurance.
- Smoke management and its effects on air quality can lead to public health concerns, limits to burn days and negative press.
- Coordination is required on many fronts: at the burn level increasing habitat fragmentation and parcelization of land ownership into smaller holdings require greater coordination; support for prescribed fire often combines multiple federal and state conservation management programs; landowners managing for multiple objectives must navigate the tension between forestry and wildlife perspectives.
- Public perception/population growth contribute to an increasing lack of understanding of the right to burn and the benefits of prescribed fire, which leads to alarm, complaints and political pressure to stop prescribed burning.
- Wildlife - forestry interface, meaning the historical separation of forestry and wildlife management disciplines, has resulted in different perspectives that can confuse landowners and create barriers to effective land management.
- Climate change is projected to cause an increase in air temperatures and precipitation variability (droughts) in the Southeast, and it has the potential to increase wildfire occurrence while also restricting the number of burn days within current prescription guidelines.

Prescribed Fire Messaging, Audiences and Communications Products
EGCPJV prescribed fire communications will be ongoing and multi-faceted. As such, the Joint Venture board and staff will select the focus, type and phasing of communications activities according to their organizational, partnership and scientific priorities. A total of 30 Prescribed Fire messages in this section are organized according to the three primary goals (policy, outreach and education) that they aim to achieve. The messages provide a flexible menu of the most important points to make with appropriate audiences. Messaging may be reworked and combined for a variety of purposes and products. A detailed discussion with background information accompanies each message, providing abundant raw material for a diversity of communications products. The EGCPJV is particularly suited to lead development and/or dissemination of five specific high priority communications products:
• a pocket guide to birds of fire maintained habitats in the South targeted to landowners, resource and program managers, and wildlife enthusiasts;
• dissemination of the National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative’s quail DVD to landowners and hunters;
• a “canned” powerpoint presentation about prescribed fire’s benefits to birds for agencies and interest groups;
• a synthesis of science related to growing season burns and birds, aimed at resource managers, consultants and wildlife enthusiasts;
• a crosswalk of EGCP State Wildlife and Forest Action Plans to identify overlapping priorities, targeted to resource agencies.
**MESSAGE LIST SUMMARY**

Please go to [http://egcpjv.org](http://egcpjv.org) or [http://tinyurl.com/o9jwvvx](http://tinyurl.com/o9jwvvx) to access a full copy of this document.

**POLICY GOAL:** Support and advocate the establishment and/or strengthening of laws, policies, budgets and regulations required to consistently allow and apply prescribed fire across the Southeast.

The Joint Venture is in a position to forge consensus among a broad group of organizations, which includes private nonprofit organizations who are best suited to conveying policy messages directly to target audiences. Target audiences consist primarily of government representatives and agencies at various levels.

1. **Message:** Every state in the Southeast needs to establish, define and protect the right to use prescribed fire, and seek to do so as consistently as possible.
   
   **Audience:** State legislatures, county governments

2. **Message:** Increase state forestry/wildlife agency budgets for prescribed fire. There is often greater public demand for prescribed fire than state agencies can meet!
   
   **Audience:** State legislatures; executive leadership of state resource agencies

3. **Message:** Increased budgets for state resource and forestry agencies will ensure states can retain all of their Pittman-Robertson federal matching dollars.
   
   **Audience:** State legislatures

4. **Message:** Increase federal budgets for prescribed fire; increase federal agency program expenditures in support of prescribed fire. There is an ecological imperative for prescribed fire on lands that are legislatively mandated to be managed for the “conservation and protection of wildlife resources” or “multiple uses,” and it is not being met. Lack of fire has direct consequences on ecological health, listed species, and hazardous fuels build up.
   
   **Audience:** Congress; executive leadership of federal resource agencies (with authority to vary budget expenditures)

5. **Message:** Maintain State Wildlife Grant and Pittman Robertson expenditures, and allow states to apply these funds toward prescribed burning projects
   
   **Audience:** Congress, State resource agencies

6. **Message:** Fire is a safe and cost-effective science-based land management tool.
   
   **Audience:** State resource management agencies/local government/landowners/ the public
7. **Message:** Prescribed fire reduces the risk of wildfire and costs much less than wildfire. Prescribed fire must be managed as an integral part of wildfire suppression and fuels reduction. We need to stop devoting our resources to emergency room treatment and start spending them on preventive medicine. Prescribed fire is the medicine that can help to reduce the frequency and intensity of wildfires as well as accelerated species listings in the Southeast.

**Audience:** Congress, federal and state resource agencies, land managers, local government, resource-dependent commercial enterprise, the public

8. **Message:** It is critically important that wildlife habitat improvement, and specifically prescribed fire, be incorporated into guidelines for EQIP and other conservation programs of the Agricultural Act of 2014. We need to expand the partnership between NRCS, resource agencies and private landowners to ensure that the EQIP program will support prescribed fire as a stewardship practice to benefit species of conservation concern, game species, and overall ecosystem health.

**Audience:** NRCS State Conservationists and staffs, State Technical Committees of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, national Forest Resource Coordinating Committee, USFS State & Private Forestry

9. **Message:** The “farm bill biologist” model works and should be considered in states that do not currently employ this model of stewardship.

**Audience:** Natural Resource Conservation Service state conservationists and staffs

10. **Message:** Multi-state analyses of both State Wildlife Action Plans and State Forest Action Plans, focusing on landscapes across boundaries and the overlapping priorities in these plans, would be tremendously useful in helping agencies and partners focus their conservation efforts. State Wildlife Action Plans should more explicitly recognize the need for prescribed fire when describing specific habitat types and species of concern.

**Audience:** State wildlife and forestry agencies, nonprofit conservation partners

11. **Message:** Agencies should seek to include privately held inholdings in prescribed burns on public lands.

**Audience:** US Forest Service, US Fish & Wildlife Service, state resource agencies

12. **Message:** Much of the demand for prescribed burning expertise and support is being funneled into a narrower and narrower range of available burn days due to both variable/changing weather patterns and burn permitting standards. Land managers are also being forced to burn smaller pieces of land to mitigate smoke impacts. Available burn days can be increased by changing smoke dispersion requirements and/or the season of burning.

**Audience:** State or local environment, air quality and/or forestry agencies.

13. **Message:** Affordable prescribed fire insurance is sorely needed, and it may also represent a business opportunity.

**Audience:** Insurance companies

14. **Message:** Visit My Forest should be a prominent link on all State Forestry websites, and wildlife agency websites as well. This website is the public interface to the “good fire” message, developed through the One Message Many Voices campaign. However, in many cases information about prescribed fire and the Visit My Forest weblink are still absent or hard to find on resource agency websites.

**Audience:** State resource management agencies, EGCPJV Management Board members

15. **Message:** County and municipal governments in the Southeast have a significant role to play in the protection of their local forests’ health, quality of life, and management of wildfire risk through measures that protect the continued use of prescribed fire.

**Audience:** County and municipal governments, land use planning departments, prescribed burn associations
OUTREACH GOAL: Foster the adoption and increased application of prescribed fire among EGCP resource program and management communities by providing science-based information and training and by focusing on achieving ecological, wildlife, and habitat benefits. Include a focus on recruitment and training of professionals and consultants to increase overall capacity for conducting prescribed burns.

Additional information is often needed to promote greater recognition of fire dependent habitats, the ecological value of prescribed fire, and the benefits of landscape scale planning to the professional/practitioner audience - including staff of government assistance programs for private land stewardship, foresters, fire control experts, state and federal resource agencies, wildlife consultants, and consulting foresters.

1. Message: The wildlife community wants to work more closely with the forestry community to integrate conservation, management and prescribed fire information and technical assistance with the goal of improving our overall effectiveness on-the-ground.

   Audience: US Forest Service and national forests, state forestry agencies, forestry extension offices, the forestry science community, consulting foresters and wildlife consultants

2. Message: The EGCPJv is willing to lead or contribute to the development of science-based wildlife- and ecosystem-centric information about the need for fire on the landscape and the ecological results of prescribed fire.

   Audience: State natural resource agencies, federal and state program staff (NRCS, USFS, USFWS), forestry/wildlife consultants, prescribed fire vendors, private landowners

3. Message: To achieve the full benefits of prescribed fire across the Southeast, landscape scale planning for fire should be a priority. Targeted delivery of prescribed fire in key regions will provide synergistic benefits with other conservation planning initiatives.

   Audience: Federal and state resource agencies, USDA state conservationists, USDA State Technical Advisory committees, NRCS county-level working groups, program managers, land managers, Landscape Conservation Cooperatives and conservation biologists, conservation planning nonprofits, and any organization that conducts conservation planning

4. Message: Program staff in state and federal agencies who administer cost-share and grant programs for private landowners will provide better service to landowners, taxpayers and the environment when they understand both the ecological and economic value of prescribed fire.

   Audience: State resource and forestry agencies, USDA state conservationists, NRCS staff

5. Message: Consulting foresters and traditional forestry assistance programs can expand and improve the assistance they provide landowners by focusing on the wildlife benefits of using prescribed fire in forest management. Expertise
in prescribed fire can provide a competitive edge to consulting foresters, wildlife consultants, tree vendors and Technical Service Providers. There is a high unmet demand for professionals who are trained and certified to conduct prescribed burns in the EGCP states; there are also federal cost-share programs that can help landowners defray the costs of planning and implementing prescribed burns.

**Audience:** Forestry/wildlife consultants; prescribed fire vendors; resource program managers

6. **Message:** The East Gulf Coastal Plain states need more “habitat teams” and/or “fire strike teams,” particularly in KY and TN.

**Audience:** State wildlife agencies, nonprofit organizations such as The Nature Conservancy, National Wild Turkey Federation, Pheasants Forever and others; habitat technicians and prescribed fire vendors

7. **Message:** Significant opportunities exist for state forestry and wildlife extension departments to play a role in developing prescribed fire education and outreach programs aimed at foresters, conservation practitioners and private landowners.

**Audience:** State land grant university extension systems and personnel, state forestry and resource management assistance programs

8. **Message:** Local fire departments can assist in making their communities safer from fire and gain valuable experience in managing fire by helping to conduct prescribed burns.

**Audience:** Local fire departments, county and municipal governments, prescribed burn associations

**EDUCATION GOAL:** Create an increased societal awareness of and demand for safe, science based application of prescribed fire in support of community safety and ecological health.

Audiences for this goal are various segments of the general public as well as private landowners, many of whom can benefit from training in application of prescribed fire.

1. **Message:** “Good fires prevent bad ones.”
   “Prescribed fire lowers the risk of wildfire.”
   “Prescribed fire is not destruction but renewal.”
   “Prescribed fire for a forest in balance.”
   “The effects of prescribed fire in a forest are kind of like mowing the grass.”
   “Fire is as natural as rain, wind, sunshine and blue skies.”

**Audience:** General public

2. **Message:** People who care about wildlife are crucial allies in the struggle to reintroduce and apply prescribed fire where it is most needed. Fire is essential to the health of most southern ecosystems, but it has been suppressed for the past 150 years or so, and coordinated anti-fire campaigns began in the 1920s. Many species of birds, including the South’s iconic bobwhite quail, respond to the plant communities that follow fire.

**Audience:** Birders and other wildlife enthusiasts
3. **Message:** Landowners must choose whether to use prescribed fire based on the benefits they desire from their land. Fire is a natural process essential to the health of most southern ecosystems, and wildlife species respond to the plants that sprout following a fire. There are public programs that provide cost-share for prescribed fire, which is also very cost-effective compared to mowing, mechanical thinning, and herbicides.
   
   **Audience:** Private landowners

4. **Message:** Landowners can learn to conduct their own prescribed burns safely by getting training or certification. By forming Prescribed Burn Associations, landowners can share knowledge, manpower and equipment - cutting down on costs. Engaged well-trained landowners are essential to achieve prescribed burning at a large scale because currently cost-share funds are insufficient for this purpose.
   
   **Audience:** Private landowners

5. **Message:** Prescribed burning is an integral part of the cultural heritage of the Southern coastal plains going back to pre-colonial times.

6. **Message:** Firewise presentations, which can be quite well attended, need to incorporate information about the role of prescribed fire in reducing wildfire risk.
   
   **Audience:** State forestry agencies

7. **Message:** Fire is essential to the health of most southern ecosystems, but it has been suppressed for the past 150 years or more. Many species of wildlife depend on the plant communities that follow fire. Prescribed fire is also a good tool for reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfires.
   
   **Audience:** Students and their parents
time series photographs of a private longleaf pine prescribed burn in Mississippi

2 months post-burn

6 months post-burn

left: native warm seasons grasses: burned (foreground) and unburned

Two priority species for open pine: blue grosbeak and American kestrel