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Fighting Fire with Fire: Prescribed Burns and Thinning Protect Wildlife and People

National Nonprofit Restoring Fire-Adapted Landscapes Nationwide

UNITED STATES, February 26, 2025 - As wildfires burn across more of the US—lasting longer each year and increasing in both frequency and intensity—they're taking an immense toll on native wildlife, compounding the devastation already felt by communities. The Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy (ARC), a national nonprofit to conserve imperiled wildlife, is actively restoring fire-adapted habitats across the US using prescribed burns and mechanical thinning to safeguard species and help prevent large, out-of-control fires.

"If you don't tend your garden, your flowers will get overtaken by weeds," said ARC Executive Director JJ Apodaca. "It's the same way with ecosystems that evolved with fire."

Frequent, low-intensity fires once acted as a force of renewal in ecosystems throughout the US, clearing out dense plant growth in the understory of forests, shrublands, and wetlands. However, decades of suppression have drastically changed many of these landscapes.

Not only do these habitats no longer provide the specialized conditions wildlife need, but the accumulation of fuel in these ecosystems is dangerous for people. Last month's fires in Los Angeles County, California, are a case in point. Flooding in the area early the previous year led to a great deal of plant growth, which then steadily dried over the year of very dry conditions that followed, providing highly flammable fuel.

On the other side of the country, the Southeastern US is a region once shaped by fire. Longleaf pine ecosystems here rely on frequent, low-intensity fires. With the loss of periodic fires, less than three percent of these forests remain, although they once blanketed the Southeast from North Carolina to East Texas.

Without fire, hardwood trees and shrubs take over, shading and crowding out the native grasses and other plants that frosted flatwoods salamanders, gopher frogs, gopher tortoises, southern hognose snakes, northern pinesnakes, and many more imperiled species depend on.

The story is the same in the post oak savannah of Texas. Here, Endangered Houston toads once thrived before the suppression of fire, which maintained open savannahs. Without fire, these habitats have become denser forests with thick understories dominated by woody species like yaupon holly, which forms a near-monoculture.

"Because these systems are overloaded with fuel, what should be small, beneficial fires turn into catastrophic infernos when the flames return," explained Apodaca.

To help prevent these large, high-intensity fires, landscapes that historically evolved with frequent natural fires need more active management like prescribed burns, mechanical thinning, and other actions.

These efforts also promote the growth of native vegetation, creating a more diverse and structurally complex environment that provides essential cover, breeding sites, foraging opportunities, and basking spots for amphibians, reptiles, and other species.

ARC is working with partners to actively restore fire-adapted landscapes in PARCAs (Priority Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Areas) throughout the country.

Without fire in longleaf pine and post oak savannah ecosystems, aggressive shrubby plants take over the wetlands where frosted flatwoods salamanders reproduce and the savannahs Houston toads need for foraging. These woody plants form such a thick, dense understory that native plants can't grow, including the grass species that the amphibians need to lay their eggs.

ARC removes this thick undergrowth to help native plants reestablish a foothold. The organization's biologists routinely employ chainsaws, tractors, and many other tools in PARCAs across the US to remove woody plants and invasive species.

ARC also works with partners to conduct prescribed burns of these PARCAs, clearing out invasive vegetation and creating the soil conditions longleaf pine and post oak seeds need to grow. These fires also maintain the open, grassy understory that supports the native biodiversity of these regions.

"Restoring fire-adapted habitats isn't just about conserving wildlife—it's about protecting entire ecosystems and the communities that depend on them," said Apodaca. "By managing these landscapes proactively, we can create healthier, more resilient environments for both people and wildlife."

About Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy (ARC)
Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy, or ARC, is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit focused on identifying and conserving the highest priority places for amphibians and reptiles in the United States. We protect endangered amphibians and reptiles through a strategic, scientific, and passionate approach. We believe the conservation of amphibians, reptiles, and the habitats they depend on is vitally important. To learn more, visit ARCProtects.org.

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