

Garnering Resources for Fuels Treatments & Restoration

*Summary of 2007 National U.S. Fire Learning Network Workshop
Tucson, Arizona • March 7-9, 2007*

Introduction

This annual meeting of the U.S. Fire Learning Network (USFLN) was designed to celebrate five years of accomplishments, synthesize lessons learned, and help participants marshal additional resources for implementation of USFLN landscape restoration actions. There were 60 people from across the U.S. in attendance. Participants included federal agency staff, Nature Conservancy scientists and prescribed fire specialists, university researchers and representatives of local community groups.

This paper summarizes some of the key themes and outcomes of the meeting and is intended to capture ideas and information that may be of use to a broad audience. Background information about the Network, as well as related project information and publications, is available at <http://tncfire.org/usfln>.

Highlights From Day 1

Plenary sessions relayed stories of implementation success and provided resources and advice related to funding fire-related restoration work. Afternoon small group sessions provided focused assistance with outreach as well as fundraising and grant administration. A fun evening exercise promoted cross-landscape learning.

McRee Anderson (Nature Conservancy) and **Lynn Jungwirth** (Watershed Center)

summarized approaches that had been successful in Arkansas' Bayou Ranger District and California's Hayfork Valley, respectively. The value of partnerships and the need for a constant, shared vision were key elements of both of these case studies. McRee and Lynn both touched on the importance of adapting to new information, whether it be new fire effects data or changing trends in the types of projects that foundations are funding. Whereas it is often necessary to update your strategies and try new tactics, big-picture goals should remain constant and serve as the foundation for everything you do.

Fran Moskovitz (Nature Conservancy) and **Darren Long** (Wildlife Conservation Society) imparted some practical fundraising tips. Darren's remarks were specific to the Wildlife Action Opportunities Fund (<http://wildlifeactionplans.org>). Here too the value of a shared vision was emphasized. In this case the goals of the project seeking money and the vision of the



An evening "landscape walk" and related "passport contest" facilitated interactions and learning.

funder need to be in alignment. Both the scale of the vision as well as the desired outcomes should be evaluated to help match projects with suitable funders.

Kim Blundy (US Natural Resources Conservation Service) and **Kate D'Ambrosio** (US Forest Service) reviewed funding opportunities related to the US Farm Bill and the National Fire Plan, respectively. Kim stressed the importance of knowing your county's NRCS staff – they influence which projects are funded. Information is also available at <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs>. Kate talked about the two main sources of federal fire-related funding – State Fire Assistance and Volunteer Fire Assistance – and mentioned that federal agencies, using the authorities outlined in the Wyden Amendment, can conduct restoration treatments on private lands if the treatments benefit watershed health.

The highlight of the day was an evening “landscape walk and passport contest.” The landscape walk was a poster session in which project sites designed a poster and table that described their work and accomplishments. Workshop participants then toured each site and had the opportunity to ask questions of project representatives stationed at their respective tables. All participants were given a “passport” that included a page for each project represented. There was space on the passport for participants to make three observations regarding the sites they visited.

In a related activity, workshop participants received five checks and an imaginary \$50,000 at the start of the meeting. Over the

course of two days, participants had ample opportunities to discuss their USFLN work with others. Participants were instructed to “fund” projects that they thought had potential to accomplish good fire restoration-related work by writing a check. Each check had brief questions printed on the front and back that asked participants to describe why they chose to fund particular projects.

While the group was gathered for dinner, the Bayou Ecosystem Restoration project team was presented with a special award recognizing their many on-the-ground achievements.

Highlights from Day 2

Several themes from Day 1 were carried into Day 2. In addition, breakout groups treated the following topics: policy-related needs of USFLN landscapes, biomass utilization issues, private lands restoration strategies, and the results of a prescribed fire liability insurance study. This part of the meeting concluded with reports of the passport contest winners and an examination of how participants decided to “spend” their money and why.

Ed Brunson (Nature Conservancy) kicked-off Day 2 with an overview of the joint Nature Conservancy-US Forest Service-US Dept. of the Interior project that funds the USFLN as well as fire education and training programs. The partnership was recently renewed for 2007–2011 and renamed the “Fire, Landscapes and People” partnership.

Laura McCarthy (Nature Conservancy) presented some interim results of an ongoing effort to incorporate the needs and

experiences of USFLN landscapes into The Nature Conservancy's privately-funded federal policy work. The objectives of the survey were to better understand (1) Network participants' perceptions of policy barriers to implementation of their landscapes' plans to restore fire-adapted ecosystems, and (2) results achieved and lessons learned from the USFLN. Laura used an online survey tool to gather information. Survey respondents listed insufficient funding and trained staff as the most important policy-related barriers they faced. Improved collaboration was the top-ranked outcome achieved through the USFLN. For more information, go to: http://tncfire.org/documents/dispatch_03_2007_000.pdf.

Margit Bucher led a session focused on high reliability organizing principles. High reliability organizations include nuclear power plants, aircraft carriers and wildland firefighting crews. Wildland fire programs across the U.S., including those focused on prescribed fire, have begun using these principles to help ensure they achieve their objectives safely and effectively. For more information go to: <http://www.wildfirelessons.net/HRO.aspx>.

Curt Gervich (Virginia Tech) interviewed a subset of participants to collect information for a study his group is conducting. This study, one of many underway at Virginia Tech that focuses on the USFLN, addresses ways that Network participants evaluate outcomes, adjust working approaches to fit strategies advocated by the Network, and convey successes and lessons learned to others. Many of the questions and comments centered around partnerships—how to evaluate them, report about them,

and know whether they are being successful. Researchers at Virginia Tech will continue to pursue these and other questions and topics at landscape and regional workshops throughout the coming months. For more information on this work please contact project principal investigator Bruce Goldstein, Assistant Professor of Environmental Planning at Virginia Tech (brugo@vt.edu; 540-231-7507).

Another case study, the Culebra Range Community Coalition in southeast Colorado, was presented by Tom Perry. This group has been successful engaging large landowners, local fire departments and others in the development of a broad-based group that is advocating for proactive forest and watershed restoration. Like other speakers before him, Tom underscored the importance of monitoring to track results, and strategic partnership development and cultivation. Tom credits the group's public education efforts with much of their success. Transforming prescribed burns into community events has been an effective outreach tactic.

Susanne Hickey (Nature Conservancy) reported on the results of strategies targeted at re-introducing fire in largely private landscapes of the Midwest. The Great Plains regional network has landscapes scattered from North Dakota to Texas that share many of the same barriers:

- Loss of fire culture;
- Limited understanding and buy-in for fire management with the current land uses;
- Liability concerns;
- Limited capacity for putting fire on the ground; and

- Fragmentation for some areas of Great Plains (small tract sizes limit burn unit size).

Because of the nature of this region’s fuels, and the high degree of private ownership, this region has not benefited from National Fire Plan funding as much as other regions.

Core strategies to date include establishing private lands mobile fire crews, landowner burn associations and statewide fire councils; seeking funding from federal cost-share programs; and outreach, education and training. There has been a lot of activity – e.g., crews and councils established, extensive local media coverage of the benefits of prescribed burning – but thus far most on-the-ground successes have been fairly small in extent. The group discussed a number of potential new strategies to leverage the USFLN to ramp up restoration to a more meaningful scale, including more extensive engagement with NRCS, influencing some of the federal privatelands conservation programs so they are more focused on fire, and developing new sources of funds for this work.

Tom Buman (Agren Inc.) reported on the results of a prescribed fire liability insurance study that the companies P.D. Mitchell and Agren had recently completed. Researchers collected information from private contractors to characterize their businesses and their prescribed fire practices and experience, including how many escapes they had experienced. A follow-up telephone survey focused on contractors that had reported escapes, specifically on the amount of property damage and suppression costs. This information enabled investigators to



The White Mountain Stewardship Project landscape walk exhibit.

summarize the “typical practices” of prescribed burn contractors, along with training and experience levels, and the types and complexity of burns conducted. Characteristics of a “typical escape” (e.g., location, fuels, value of damages) were also compiled. Researchers were able to look across the data and compile 11 characteristics of prescribed burners at higher risk for escapes. View the final report at <http://www.agren-inc.com/Final%20Report%20Rx%20Fire%20Survey%202006.pdf>. The information will be provided to insurance companies, private contractors and NGOs.

Nick Goulette (Watershed Center) outlined the impediments associated with planning for biomass harvesting, harvesting operations and biomass utilization. He covered issues of culture, economics and capacity and detailed the many social, economic, and ecological opportunities associated with biomass. He also presented a case study of biomass work conducted to date in the Hayfork Basin in Northern California.

Discussion centered around site-specific problems and strategies, as well as potential roles for the USFLN. The group determined that an important role for other regional FLNs might be to help build the partnerships with the private sector (entrepreneurs, local businesses and investors) and conservation groups to match up efforts for restoration with businesses that can utilize the byproducts. Regional FLNs might be able to help build the partnerships early in planning processes.

Bruce Goldstein (Virginia Tech) analyzed the results of the passport contest and check-writing activity shortly after the workshop. He found that many of the observations recorded in passports (submitted after the landscape walk) were identical to the themes identified as important in making funding decisions. Common observations touched on the following elements:

- Outreach materials,
- Partnerships,
- Ecological and social context,
- On-the-ground fire accomplishments, and
- Leadership and personnel.

There were also some common threads among sites receiving four or more checks:

- Diverse activities and objectives,
- Leadership and personnel,
- Geographic/biodiversity priorities, and
- Evidence of effective partnerships.

Highlights From Day 3

Participants visited three areas southeast of Tucson: Las Cienegas National Conservation Area, Canelo Pass and the

Conservancy's Patagonia-Sonoita Creek Preserve. The first site is managed by the US Bureau of Land Management. Fire frequency, structure and function of these grasslands were and are altered by tree and shrub encroachment (mesquite), a history of fire suppression, invasive species (Lehmann lovegrass) and grazing. Prior to the 20th Century, shrubs were inconspicuous in these semi-desert grasslands, suggesting that fires were frequent enough to prevent shrub encroachment.

At Canelo Pass on the Coronado National Forest the group discussed the stark contrast between natural community structure and composition on the U.S. and Mexican sides of the border. In Mexico, where fire suppression is limited, savannas are present on the hills. These same systems are typically present as woodlands on the U.S. side of border as a result of fire exclusion.

Fire management activities in the area are constrained by undocumented aliens (UDAs). Unattended campfires during cold months, likely left by UDAs, are increasingly the source of wildfires in this area. The safety of the UDAs, as well as that of fire personnel, is a major concern when planning and implementing fire operations in this part of the state. Fire management requires coordination with Customs and the Immigration and Naturalization Service under the Department of Homeland Security.

Issues discussed during a visit to the Patagonia-Sonoita Creek Preserve centered around riparian vegetation and hazardous fuels management, wildland-urban interface issues and watershed condition

and function. The fuels and riparian vegetation here reflect histories of disturbance. Still, fire frequency, fire ecology and fire effects in these systems are poorly understood. Although the riparian gallery species are not dependent on fire for renewal, regular fire is an important disturbance for the sacaton grasslands that used to be more extensive in these valley bottoms. Fires may have spread into riparian corridors from adjacent uplands. Currently, riparian areas tend to be viewed separately from the surrounding landscape. This means that they are usually not treated, which results in a build-up of hazardous fuels. Specific goals of The Nature Conservancy and its partners throughout southeastern Arizona in this vegetation type are to restore or maintain a range of plant communities or successional stages, improving watershed condition and function.

This trip served to highlight the diversity of issues faced by conservationists and land

managers in southern Arizona. Many of these same issues are also found in other regions of the U.S. The growing wildland-urban interface in some areas, livestock ranching and cross-border immigration are examples of obstacles that stem from socioeconomic issues. Biological barriers to maintaining and restoring grassland and savanna ecosystems include invasion by non-native plants and also native trees and shrubs. Underlying most of these problems are public policies related to: how agencies respond to wildfires, zoning (or lack thereof) to guide development in fire-prone areas, and immigration.

A number of people generously contributed their time and talents to planning and conducting this field trip: Brooke Gebow, Matt Killeen, Dave Gori, Peter Warren and Gita Bodner. The USFLN thanks these individuals for their assistance.



Looking toward Mexico from Canelo Pass, Coronado National Forest, Arizona.