



Fire Learning Network Notes from the Field

Southern Blue Ridge FLN Central Escarpment Workshop

McDowell County, North Carolina
October 3, 2018

After the severe wildfire season experienced by the southern Appalachians in fall of 2016, people are still wary of smoke in the air. The FLN is using this window of interest to gain traction for good fire and Firewise communities.

A Focus on Community

The Central Escarpment FLN landscape workshop drew a diverse group of partners from The Nature Conservancy, U.S. Forest Service, North Carolina Forest Service and State Parks, RC&Ds from Southern Appalachian and North Georgia regions, McDowell County Emergency Management and the local community. The 23 participants discussed the accomplishments of the Grandfather CFLRP project and how to continue momentum into its final year; controlled burn projects, including the Southern Blue Ridge (SBR) TREX; and local Firewise efforts, improvements and challenges.

Nearly every conversation seemed to develop around the same theme: building community support for fire in the southern Appalachians. Although many of these mountain ecosystems evolved with regular fire, controlled burning is not as widely accepted in the uplands as it is in North Carolina's more coastal communities. Following the 2016 wildfires, FLN partners have been pushing harder than ever to get good fire on the ground and reduce wildfire risk. Some communities, like Creston, represented at the meeting by local "spark plug" Dinese Drake, are jumping on board to become better fire adapted. McDowell County Ranger Chris Davis, with the state Forest Service, said that since the wildfires, they receive many more calls from people concerned about smoke and wildfire. On the other hand, some communities are still resistant.



Controlled burn at Osborne Ridge Knob, in the Central Escarpment FLN landscape.

© TNC (Dean M. Simon)

In general, relationships between firefighters and communities are strengthening, but participants identified a need to continue focusing fire adapted communities (FAC) outreach where there is traction. The meeting served as a platform for members to share what has been working, what hasn't, and were to focus future efforts. Public attention spans are often short, but the severity of the 2016 fires and the continued reminders raging in California have kept people engaged. FLN partners in the Central Escarpment are working to gain as much ground as possible while this window remains open.

Adam Warwick—the Conservancy's SBR stewardship manager, and co-lead of the Central Escarpment Landscape—brought up a study presented by Kathryn Gaash at the regional SBR FLN workshop held in the South Carolina highlands in May. Gaash's study focused on community perceptions of wildfire and controlled burning in the Southern

Key Takeaways

- Calls about smoke have increased significantly since Gatlinburg and the fall 2016 wildfire season.
- Relationships between firefighters and the community are strengthening.
- Public workdays help build awareness and relationships.
- Focus fire adapted communities (FAC) and outreach work where we are getting traction—news of what we are doing travels best by word of mouth.
- Community meetings help jump-start Firewise work for Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) staff—do more of these.
- The RC&D FAC Coalition will be funded for Firewise work in western North Carolina through 2020.
- There is a backlog of burning on private lands due to lack of staff and burn days. A prescribed burn association could be a solution (see the Sandhills Prescribed Burn Association), but someone needs to drive the effort.
- There is interest in holding Central Escarpment landscape meetings more often.

Appalachians. When asking about the 2016 wildfires, Gaash found that many people believed that the Forest Service actually set the fires! Jessica Hocx, with the Mountain Valleys RC&D, provided some explanation for this belief, noting that backfires used to control one of the wildfires actually accounted for more acres than the wildfire itself. This can be difficult to justify to community members and private landowners. People often

Right: The 2018 publication *Considerations for Wildlife & Fire in the Southern Blue Ridge* by Adam Warwick and Craig A. Harper provides brief summaries of the biology and most recent science of fire effects for select wildlife species. Photos are included as well as locations where habitat management for those species can be seen on public lands in the southern Appalachians. This publication provides a fantastic resource for communicating issues surrounding fire and wildlife.

overlook the overall strategy used on a fire, Ranger Chris Davis pointed out—that we could have lost more had we let the fire get out of hand.

Dean Simon, who retired from the North Carolina Forest Service and is now working as a Conservancy burn boss and helping with TREX events, added that news about accidents and fatalities catches people's attention. He stressed the need to reiterate how the strategy of allowing fires to back out, using existing lines, is part of the protocol to keep people—including first responders—safe. No one argues with "Safety first."

Resource Conservation & Development (RC&D) Councils

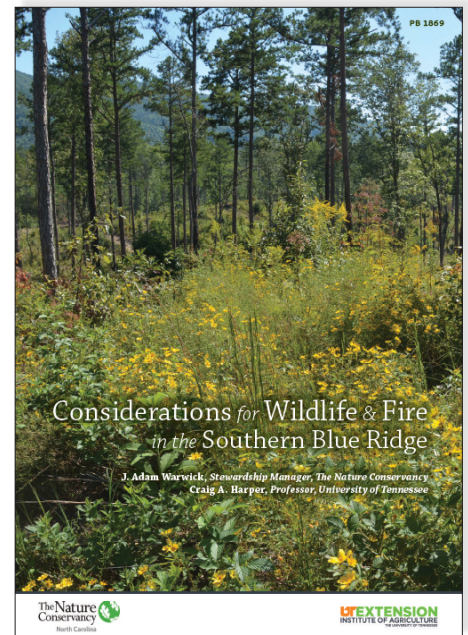
The Appalachian RC&D FAC Coalition reported that it has been funded for Firewise work in North Carolina through 2020. They have also applied for a Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) grant that has controlled burning built into it and strategically selects places for implementation. And the coalition noted that Vicki Christiansen, the newly appointed

U.S. Forest Service chief, has a good relationship with RC&Ds, which bodes well for increased support from the Forest Service.

Lynn Sprague, from the Southwestern North Carolina RC&D, emphasized grassroots involvement. Discussions with local foresters have been helpful, and Firewise communities have been forming as a result of FLN outreach. Frank Riley, with the Chestatee-Chattahoochee RC&D and the FAC coalition, suggested starting any new outreach with RC&D folks—they live in the communities, and can help find the "sparkplug" person to take discussion beyond the meetings. "Empower them and see where it goes."

Grandfather CFLRP Project

The purpose of the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) is to encourage collaborative, science-based ecosystem restoration of priority forest landscapes. The Grandfather Ranger District became a CFLRP site in 2012, building on a foundation laid by its partnership with the Central Escarpment FLN. As the



project nears the end of its eight-year term, Lisa Jennings, the recreation program manager on the Grandfather Ranger District and CFLRP coordinator, spoke about its accomplishments, and led a discussion about how to maintain momentum in its final year.

Priorities of Grandfather CFLRP project have been:

- Restoring fire-adapted ecosystems;
- Restoring wildlife habitat;
- Treating non-native invasive species in priority areas;
- Treating hemlocks for the invasive woolly adelgid; and
- Watershed restoration, including increasing connectivity for fish, streamside restoration, and trail restoration to keep sediment from getting into creeks.

Controlled Burn "Elevator Pitches"

"Wildfires are thought of as raging. Controlled burns are low-intensity, backing down a slope, cleaning up fuels, not getting rid of everything and that's not what you're trying to do. Go and look at [a regularly burned landscape] and see the burned areas and how healthy the look. Refer to good fire and bad fire."

— Chris Davis, McDowell Co. Ranger NCFs

The three basics are: fuel reduction, improving wildlife habitat, and dependency and adaptation of forest communities (promoting forest health).

Use examples people can relate to, like how house plants need more sun than shade, similarly fire helps get light to the forest floor. Arguing for pollinators resonates with gardeners, and examples of wild turkey using burned habitat resonates with hunters.

Other examples of using fire to improve wildlife habitat can be found in the recent publication by Adam Warwick and Craig A. Harper, *Considerations for Wildlife and Fire in the Southern Blue Ridge*.

Fire Learning Trails are a great way for people to see the effects of good fire with their own eyes. State parks are the best places to implement these trails because of heavier visitor traffic and rangers to lead interpretive hikes. This year the Central Escarpment is focusing on putting in a trail at South Mountains State Park.



Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges (TREN) are designed to build capacity for prescribed fire by bringing together diverse groups of fire practitioners and other stakeholders to share skills, knowledge and resources. The events have been successful in providing capacity to local partners and helping participants to get more training, sometimes in new or different habitats and fuels. Nine TREN and related events took place this fall, including the SBR TREN in South Carolina—the first TREN to have access to a helicopter. For many at this workshop, a highlight of the coming spring TREN season will be the Women in Fire TREN (WTREN) hosted at Tall Timbers, near Tallahassee, Florida.

The Grandfather project has restored about 40,000 acres to date. It also conducts monitoring through its partnership with the FLN; this includes work with Pete Bates at Western Carolina University, and the installation of wildlife cameras on a controlled burn unit this year.

Prescribed fire across the Grandfather has increased from 2,000 to 6,000 acres a year. Last year this included burning 5,500 acres in two units, using a helicopter for ignitions. During the fall 2018 through spring 2019 burn season, the project plans to burn a 3,500-acre unit in McDowell County, as well as additional smaller units as burn windows allow. Being part of the CFLRP for the past eight years has made the Grandfather a Forest Service priority in North Carolina. When CFLRP funding ends, the district is will face a transition, but is determined to keep the ball rolling.

Fire and Water

Adam Warwick talked about some of the work of the Conservancy's SBR Fire Crew. Created four years ago, it has been conducting fire effects monitoring to determine whether



Twenty-three partners from the Central Escarpment landscape met at McDowell Technical Community College in Marion, North Carolina. This 425,000-acre landscape is part of the regional Southern Blue Ridge Fire Learning Network. © TNC (Grace McLeod)

management objectives are being met with current burning practices. A recently added component of this monitoring has been looking at forest-water connections and the role of fire in that relationship. With the absence of fire, forests are shifting away from fire-tolerant oak and pine systems and towards more mesophytic communities, dominated by shade-tolerant species. The SBR FLN has partnered with Coweeta Hydrologic Laboratory, a tract of the Nantahala National Forest which functions as an outdoor living laboratory and experimental forest that has been measuring stream and groundwater flow in response to forest alterations since the 1930s. Research at Coweeta is showing that much more water is taken up by mesophytic tree species, so streamflow is reduced as forest communities shift away from their fire-adapted predecessors. This has important implications for people living downstream who need drinking water, especially as more people continue to move into the area.

The Mountain Valleys RC&D is also working closely with water quality projects, examining the overlap between firesheds and watersheds, and how forests determine water quality.

Fire and Indigenous People

Marek Smith, director of the national Fire Learning Network, gave an update on the national FLN and the cooperative agreement that supports it, PERFECT. He talked about the expansion of the FLN and PERFECT to include more tribes and indigenous

peoples through the Indigenous Peoples Burning Network (IPBN). Working with these groups provides an insight into the cultural significance of fire, as well as alternative ways to approach networking. We tend to think about expanding the network by reaching out and incorporating other agencies and organizations, but IPBN relationships are often established through family ties; growth in this direction is more successful when the new members to come to FLN and ask for resources or partnership, rather than the FLN initiating the relationship.

However the partnership grows, participants left the workshop a bit wiser, a bit more connected—and looking forward to their next gathering.

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The Fire Learning Network is part of *Promoting Ecosystem Resilience and Fire Adapted Communities Together*, a cooperative agreement between The Nature Conservancy, USDA Forest Service and agencies of the Department of the Interior. For more information about PERFECT, contact Marek Smith at marek_smith@tnc.org.

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