

Scaling-up to Promote Ecosystem Resilience (SPER III)

Scaling-up to Enable the Social and Operational Capacity for “Right Fire”

January 2015 – December 2017

The SPER strategy began in 2011, with relatively modest amounts of funding strategically targeting implementation that yields larger-scale impacts: SPER projects have filled gaps or otherwise helped bring work in progress to a landscape scale. They have been catalysts, accelerating work in key places. In the first phase, six SPER I projects completed more than 20,000 acres of treatments in support of ecosystem resiliency, community safety and watershed protection. Under SPER II, five projects completed 3,000 acres of treatments, and local fire management capacity was increased through several training opportunities.

SPER III is focusing on fewer places, more intensively, to accelerate the development of both the social and the operational capacity for using fire, benefitting forest resiliency and community wildfire protection alike. We think of this as getting to “right fire”—fire at the right time, right place and of the right size to move us toward our goal of living better with fire.

Spring 2015: The First Three SPER III Projects

Three projects began work under SPER III in the spring of 2015 with the goal of briskly moving these landscapes toward a healthy relationship with “right fire”—mitigating the damage from severe, uncharacteristic wildfire, while living safely with wildfire that the natural systems need to remain resilient. All three projects—in California, New Mexico and Oregon—build on a foundation laid by long-term partnerships under the Fire Learning Network, Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network and Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges.

The three SPER projects that began work in 2015 proposed thinning and prescribed fire treatments on 965 acres over the three-year period.

To date, at just past the half-way point, they have completed **1,383 acres of treatments—531 acres of thinning and 852 acres of prescribed burning.**



Laying down fire during the Tule Creek prescribed burn near Hayfork, CA.

© WRTC (Josh Smith)

California: Trinity Integrated Fire Management Partnership

SPER support has helped the Watershed Research and Training Center (WRTC) convene the Trinity Integrated Fire Management Partnership to develop strategies and outline opportunities, and formalize a shared fire management curriculum. Project leads also engage with CAL FIRE to expand their opportunities to burn, and reach out to fire practitioners through the Northern California Prescribed Fire Council to private landowners through one-on-one meetings to expand the reach of the partnership. WRTC has partnered with the Hayfork and Weaverville water districts to develop plans for expanding their service areas and to work to develop support for forest management activities on the basis of local water supplies. Burning under SPER has included land managed by or critically important to these municipal watersheds. The SPER burning also emphasizes local capacity-building by engaging local nonprofits, landowners and volunteer fire departments. All project work will be recorded in a CWPP update and integrated into the county’s fire management strategy.

Work this fall included hosting four days of the Women in Fire Prescribed Fire Training Exchange (WTREX) and offering basic training for local crewmembers, who immediately took part in burns on private and USFS lands. SPER crews also completed site preparations on more than 100 acres of an upcoming burn unit.



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VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Several owners of land adjacent to the Tule Creek burn conducted this fall “have been very concerned and wary of the use of prescribed fire on the landscape. They have expressed their concerns about the potential risks and the adjacency to populated areas. As we safely conduct burns like this, however, these landowners are now working with the WRTC on expanding the burn plan area onto their properties. Although they are still concerned and worried, they are now accepting of the practice and optimistic about the potential of bringing good fire to the landscape that they care so much for.”

New Mexico: Integrating Fire Adapted Communities, Resilient Landscapes and Response to Wildland Fire in the San Juan-Chama Headwaters of the Rio Grande Water Fund

Chama Peak Land Alliance, The Nature Conservancy and the Rio Grande Water Fund are members of the community based San Juan-Chama Watershed Partnership. Its strategy is to host a collaborative, cross-boundary, multi-stakeholder process to protect drinking water supplies by creating landscape resiliency. SPER is supporting this partnership as it prioritizes forest projects at the landscape scale, coordinates fire plans and agreements for fire management activities across jurisdictional

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“SPER support also allowed the Rio Grande Water Fund (RGWF) to invest in a resilience strategy for the Navajo and Blanco basins in southwest Colorado. Water diverted from these watersheds into the Rio Grande provides about a third of the surface water used by half of the population of New Mexico. We anticipate that based on this strategy work we will be able to make the case to the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility to invest their funds in fire risk reduction treatments in these critical watersheds. This creates the critical link between the water-producing watersheds and the primary water user—a goal of the RGWF.”

boundaries, adapts forest management based on monitoring and feedback, and builds capacity and knowledge for prescribed burns through trainings and other learning experiences.

This fall saw more than 300 acres of burning on private land on Rancho Lobo in northern New Mexico and on the Banded Peak project, across the border in Colorado. Planning is also under way for more burns in these areas at a TREX that will take place in May that will include ranch hands from the area.

SPER work was also cited as leverage for a successful NRCS Regional Conservation



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Partnership Program proposal that will provide \$3.2 million to further expand treatments in the Upper San Juan-Chama landscape.

Oregon: Ashland Forest All-Lands Restoration Project

Partners in the AFAR project are working to create a durable community fabric of local capacity for right fire, to help ensure lasting funding for landscape scale maintenance, to influence smoke management policy for greater flexibility, and to support the community in its adoption of right fire. SPER support has helped integrate AFAR effort with a Joint Chiefs’ funded project in the city’s watershed, including engaging the community in planning and implementation during the bridge period before the Joint Chiefs’ work began. In the spring of 2016, SPER supported the Ashland TREX, bringing heightened public and stakeholder awareness and support to prescribed burning and the Cohesive Strategy, and helping the community move toward burning with appropriate effects and at a meaningful

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“While the agencies and our partners are pursuing ways to better manage expectations around smoke to ease restrictions that limit burn days, public stakeholders have been given little cause for concern and so have not elevated smoke issues. This lack of concern stems from the benign impacts of the AFR winter pile burning, which is often not visible above the low clouds, and the several broadcast burns on city, Forest Service and private lands, including TREX burns in May 2016, which were successfully conducted with little smoke impact.”

scale. The project has also supported a series of facilitated community listening sessions, focus groups and shared learning and planning workshops that are enabling the community to collaboratively address barriers and reach agreements that define a fire management plan embracing “right fire” and informing the agency Wildland Fire Decision Support System.

With the planned implementation under SPER completed, this project has moved on to outreach and engagement strategies that will ensure continued support for ongoing work in the municipal watershed. In addition to several tours of treatment sites, for both public and agency/regulator audiences, partners are working on a series of events that will help the community come to agreement on management of smoke-related concerns.



Fall 2016: Two Additional SPER III Projects

Two additional partnerships received a pulse of SPER support in the fall of 2016, intended to supplement the existing body of cooperative work in each area as the communities and landscapes move toward right fire. As with the earlier SPER III projects each has a strong footing in FLN and FAC Net as well as TRES experience.

California: Scaling Up Right Fire in the Western Klamath Mountains

Central to this project was providing leadership and management support for the Klamath River TRES this fall. In support of this—and of future prescribed burning—were investments in engagement with CAL FIRE and Forest Service to increase support for prescribed fire through permitting, formal and informal agreements, participation and funding. Similarly, engagement of local, regional and state Air Quality Management Districts is helping to maximize the potential for using prescribed fire in the Western Klamath Mountains and surrounding landscapes. Partners are also providing support and expertise to inform the Wildfire Risk Analysis effort for six National Forests in northern California. Together, these efforts are aimed at garnering support for managing wildfires to achieve resource and community benefits.

Discussions with numerous agencies this fall were quite fruitful, with outcomes including Forest Service commitments to discuss the Wildfire Risk Analysis at

the spring Klamath Fire Symposium, increase participation in next fall’s Klamath River TRES, and provide significant funding for that TRES.

New Mexico: Cooperative Burning in New Mexico

Forest Stewards Guild is organizing and leading a series of cooperative burns that leverage existing relationships and projects to strengthen New Mexico’s overall capacity to deliver—and embrace—planned fire. The cooperative burn projects provide treatments to lands that need it, while providing training to local and regional practitioners, and opportunities to engage with communities and influence perceptions of and relationships with fire.

This project hosted the first burns of the Spanish-language TRES, in mid-September; when conditions were unexpectedly favorable, the Burn Boss was able to adjust the plan, allowing the crew to burn a full 20-acre unit, rather than conducting only the test burns. A week of cooperative burning near Black Lake in October yielded about 500 acres of effective treatments in spite of damp conditions, and provided training opportunities for 37 people, including many from local fire agencies, as well as several Youth Corps members.

Left: On the October 2016 Klamath River TRES. © Mid Klamath Watershed Center
Right: After the Black Lake burn. © FSG

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

“The scale of the burn at Black Lake—especially given its proximity to homes—was our most significant accomplishment this fall. It was part of a very ambitious year for the Guild and NM State Land Office in this WUI setting—especially with no moisture predicted after the burn. To manage for this, we adjusted our plans to increase patrolling resources after the burn. The site was patrolled for nearly three weeks after the demobilization thanks to existing partners and allocation of funds to pay for a firefighter and the local VFD to patrol and apply water during and in advance of some red flag days.”

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“The amount of acceptance and support for prescribed fire in California is rapidly expanding—we are seeing it from individuals and communities in the Western Klamath Mountains FLN area to the state and regional levels of CAL FIRE and the Forest Service. Recent wildfires have caused state and federal fire managers to look for alternative fire management strategies, and invest in them. Through the Western Klamath Restoration Partnership and TRES, we can help by providing key examples of how cost savings can be realized, while achieving better ecological results on the ground and protecting and enhancing cultural resources. The ability for our staff to communicate and engage with stakeholders at all levels is instrumental in facilitating this paradigm shift.”

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