

Scaling-up to Promote Ecosystem Resilience

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

January 2015 – December 2017

SPER III FINAL REPORT

The SPER initiative began in the fall of 2011 as a two-year pilot program to test new methods of increasing the scale of forest restoration by focusing on cross-boundary forest treatments in Fire Learning Network (FLN) landscapes. In the fall of 2013, the second phase of SPER built on this successful strategy by advancing work on a subset of those landscapes with partners in the Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network (FAC Net).

The next logical step was to more deeply engage partners and community members to deepen the understanding

about why achieving active fire use on the land was critical, and to create a rich multi-scale co-learning environment in which to achieve social and ecological fire goals, including prescribed fire and greater use of natural ignitions.

Our working hypothesis was that we could accelerate towards our goal by synergizing our strategies—primarily the Fire Learning Network (FLN), FAC Net and Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges (TREX)—in a select number of places that we had developed enabling social and ecological conditions to a critical level. And

through further strategic focus on some of the less-robust elements—diplomacy, critical co-learning about fire, fire effects, smoke, prescribed fire and fire use—we could accelerate to enabling integrated fire management, a less expensive and more socially and ecologically sustainable future option than mechanical thinning.

We selected three pilot landscapes for the first work under SPER III—in northern California (Klamath-Siskiyou region), southern Oregon (Ashland area) and northern New Mexico (Rio Grande watershed). In

2016, additional projects in adjacent landscapes in California and New Mexico were added.

Through this approach we developed clear examples of local achievement of integrated manifestation of the goals of the Cohesive Strategy. Key to the success of all the SPER III projects was approaching the work collaboratively, with community, state, federal and tribal partners all having important and complementary roles.



Fire in the Klamath: “The SPER III funding came at a critical time when CAL FIRE and USFS Region 5 leadership were beginning in earnest to shift the fire management paradigm in California, and allowed us to provide proof of concept for many of the actions that need to be implemented regionally to shift this paradigm.... When the pilot started, relationships with key decision-makers at CAL FIRE, USFS R5 and the California Air Resources Board were not well established. Now we are being used as national examples of how the three tenets of the Cohesive Strategy can be implemented together to create fire management strategies that work—and just received news we were selected by CAL FIRE for a Partnership Award for Superior Performance in Prescribed Fire.”

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SPER III Projects

state	project	abbreviation	built on local work by
CA	Trinity Integrated Fire Management Partnership	TIFMP	FLN, FAC Net, TREX
CA	Scaling Up Right Fire in the Western Klamath Mountains	Klamath	FLN, FAC Net, TREX, IPBN
NM	Integrating Fire Adapted Communities, Resilient Landscapes and Response to Wildland Fire in the San Juan-Chama Headwaters of the Rio Grande Water Fund	RGWF	FLN, FAC Net
NM	Cooperative Burning in New Mexico	NM-Coop	FAC Net, TREX
OR	Ashland Forest All-Lands Restoration	AFAR	FLN, FAC Net

Key Actions Supported by SPER III

When asked to reflect on what the most important actions they completed under SPER III were, answers from the project leaders fell into four general categories:

Building Relationships

This included work with state fire agencies, local fire chief associations and county permitting agencies to build mutual understanding and gain support from leadership. It also included, for example, a series of fire knowledge exchange workshops with a wide range of stakeholders that used “fuzzy cognitive mapping” to help various interest groups express themselves and understand others. And it led to at least one MOU that will allow for managing natural ignitions fires across ownerships.

Expanding TRES and Other Capacity-

Building Training

SPER provided supplemental support for additional TRES in all three states, providing critical training, relationship-building and experience to local practitioners and landowners. It also supported customized live-fire training for local fire service and NGO personnel, and cooperative burning events with a strong focus on training.

Implementing Fire “Firsts”

SPER supported burns that “couldn’t” be completed in a landscape: A 500-acre burn near Black Lake showed that a cooperative burn model could be successful in a WUI and timber situation in New Mexico on non-federal lands. Burning about 300 acres of private ranch land gave landowners more confidence in using fire as a tool and increased interest in building fire capacity.

Developing Landscape-Scale Pilot Projects

With the relationships and proof-of-concept in place, SPER supported the development of projects that will carry the work forward. Three such pilot projects in the Western Klamath Mountains encompass nearly 50,000 acres. An ambitious cross-boundary project is underway in the WUI and watershed of the Weaver Basin. A science-based fire and post-fire impacts risk assessment and collaborative forest treatment strategy has been created for the Blanco and Navajo Basins, and has led to new investments by regional water authorities.



Cooperative burning in New Mexico: “Through the burning partnerships associated with the SPER III funding, and through companion investments, we are now working to bring the Gravitas Peak Wildland Fire Module under our umbrella. This significantly increases organizational capacity to advance the practice of prescribed fire in New Mexico and in the surrounding states by having a qualified and insured burn boss on staff. This is in contrast to the situation in July 2016, when our proposal to contract with an insured burn boss to burn received no bids from New Mexico or surrounding states. Ever since we first began working on our first TRES, finding an insured local burn boss was always a challenge. Now it seems that challenge has been overcome.”

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AFAR “fuzzy cognitive mapping” exercise: “The community has shifted from wariness of burning, and a vigilance to detect and decry smoke intrusions, to supporting proactive burning and tolerating smoke. The mayor, the chamber of commerce, and the health community now publicly articulate the key role of using fire in regional forests and the need to tolerate smoke. The health provider community has helped us develop outreach messages, including a co-branded smoke/health management brochure. The mayor is promoting smoke-smart action planning to mitigate impacts in town, and local leadership is actively engaged alongside the Conservancy in statewide smoke management policy dialogue to increase fire use. Local government, education and business leaders have helped Ashland partners create a community engagement plan focused on fire management, and helped write a smoke communications plan. USFS fire management leaders are better engaging partners to create and take advantage of more burn windows, and after mixed results in project burning, we have advanced new communication protocol and deepened communications and professional relationships to improve team performance.”

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Briefing before a burn on the Chama landscape in the RGWF: “SPER III funding provided the support for Conservancy staff to work consistently with the wide range of partners such a large landscape includes. We now have strong relationships on both sides of the state line, including forest and fire managers from state agencies, three national forests, FireWise of Southwest Colorado, NRCS, Bureau of Reclamation, local fire districts, and private ranch managers and owners. We will continue to build on these partnerships to expand forest and fire management efforts into the foreseeable future. The role of Chama Peak Land Alliance has likewise evolved, and the organization and its membership have gained confidence in using fire as a tool, and in playing a pivotal role in expanding collaborative forest restoration beyond private lands.”

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Lessons Learned through Work on SPER III

Planning together matters...

“Creating a shared vision for fire management on a specific landscape from local to regional and national levels is essential for success. The Open Standard Process for Conservation, that facilitates diverse groups organizing around shared values, is a powerful model for creating this shared vision.”

Partnerships matter...

“We need to integrate local fire response organizations. Support from county fire marshals and fire districts is critical if private land treatments are part of a multijurisdictional landscape, since they have the responsibility for suppression. The key questions that need to be answered satisfactorily for any effort to expand the use of fire across jurisdictions are: Who is liable? and Who pays? This makes it important that fire risk with—and without—active fire use be assessed, and that all the collaborators agree with the characterization of risk and how to reduce it.”

“Our science-based risk assessment process made it possible for us to engage with the Forest Service in a deeper way through discussions with the technical staff. We could bring useful tools to the table and not rely on the agency to provide all the data.”

People matter...

“The initiative, skill and passion of burn bosses is critical to success. I had previously worked with burn bosses who were limited in those elements. They put fire on the ground but did so reluctantly and

without vision. Then I burned with Jeremy Bailey and other high capacity burn bosses and saw what it was like to work with a leader with skill and passion....We realized excellent results with regards to training, acres and fire effects, in a way that inspired others....Moving forward, I will endeavor to work with and develop the type of burn leader that leads excellent burns and moves the large needle towards resilient landscapes and fire adapted communities.”

Real communication matters...

“As the 2017 wildfire season wore on in the Rogue River Basin, concern and uncertainty about community and economic risks, intersecting with increased national incivility and rhetoric, along with smoldering resentments of more isolated, timber-dependent communities, unleashed a vicious political backlash against the role and responsibilities of the Forest Service for managing fire, and against environmentalist views of the role of fire, and in favor of simplistic answers. But in Ashland, where investments in ongoing dialogue about using fire were underway (and also where risks to community were lower) the community dialogue remained positive and only served to reinforce the need for more controlled burning and fire managed for resource benefit.”

“Our community generally understands and is willing to live with prescribed fires and thoughtfully managed wildfires, but we really need a more open and transparent planning process to welcome their insights and recommendations on how and when to manage natural ignitions.”

Briefing before a TIMFP burn Weaver Basin: “SPER III allowed us to work on building relationships with CAL FIRE leadership at the state and local unit levels, including working with them to refine protocols and leadership direction for engaging in standby fire protection on cooperative burns. It has led to a transformation in our cooperative work with CAL FIRE. Under SPER III, we have always been able to obtain burn permits when in prescription. Further, CAL FIRE has sent engines and crews and actively helped as a holding resource on almost all of our burns on private lands during the project period.” © WRTC (Dave Jaramillo)



On-the-Ground Implementation with SPER III Support

state	project	treatment acres (fire & thinning)		notes
		proposed	implemented	
CA	TIFMP	125	386	includes 202 acres of prescribed fire
CA	Klamath			but see 2016, 2017 Klamath TRES (717 acres)
NM	RGWF	800	970	includes 718 acres of prescribed fire
NM	NM-Coop	335	520	all prescribed fire
OR	AFAR	40	183	includes 58 acres of prescribed fire; also see Ashland TRES (70 acres)
TOTAL		1,300	2,059	



TIFMP training burn in an oak woodland: “SPER III allowed us to expand our planning to a much broader geography associated with enhancing source-watershed resilience with fire. We initiated planning in the Weaver Basin, which we have parlayed into substantial funding, partnerships, burn plans, and now, implementation. We also completed our first burn plan and cooperative burn in the Upper Trinity River Watershed, which feeds California’s Central Valley Project. We were also able to expand our burn planning to new landowners around Hayfork’s community water source. This expanded planning and associated expanded partnerships have also helped attract additional funding.”

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Critical Factors for Success Enabled by Modest Infusion of Funds

Common themes reported by SPER III project leaders included that the support enabled:

- Ability to access fire planning skills to work on collaborative planning
- Development of portfolios of places to burn that had full community support
- The important work of diplomacy with state and regional authorities to proceed, building political support for burning
- Formation of additional partnerships and key relationships
- Engaging skilled burn bosses with a holistic approach to burning
- Engaging a broader array of fire response organizations, including municipal and volunteer fire departments, as well as state and federal agencies
- Strategic assessments that included other cultural knowledge and western science
- Leveraging further funding to continue and expand work on the ground

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