



Fire Learning Network Notes from the Field

Southern Blue Ridge FLN Annual Workshop 2015

The Southern Blue Ridge FLN (SBR FLN) recently hosted its tenth annual workshop, its most popular gathering yet. More than 80 natural resource specialists from 22 agencies and organizations filled the room to learn about successes across the southern Appalachian Mountains landscape. Margit Bucher, Fire Manager for The Nature Conservancy's North Carolina chapter and co-lead of the SBR FLN, kicked off the three-day workshop with a reminder of our goals. Throughout the workshop, participants contributed examples of how we continue to meet them.

Enhance Fire Planning on the Landscape Level

Our burn prioritization tool continues to allow agencies to rank potential burn units by ecological need. As a result of this process, the Central Escarpment Landscape shifted priorities and began working more with partners—and their Grandfather Project ended up being selected as a Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) project three years ago. Since then, burn acres have doubled. This year brought the first landscape-scale growing season burn and the first two-unit burn day for the Pisgah National Forest.

Build Capacity for Implementation

This spring, over 50 prescribed burners worked on their task books in a Prescribed Fire Training Exchange (Trex) that they will never forget. Despite snow and ice storms and record cold temperatures, the crew managed to accomplish nine controlled burns. This event solidified relations between agency staff, as they burned together...and bonded over kerosene heaters.

Transfer Lessons Learned

One of the highlights of the workshop was the panel on growing-season burning, where some of our most experienced fire managers offered their observations and advice. Greg Philipp, District Fire Management Officer for the Grandfather Ranger District, reminded us not to sugar-coat the effects: growing season fires kill trees. But that indicates that summer fires do the work of several dormant season burns and get us to our desired conditions more quickly.



Partners are thinking creatively with outreach—in addition to more traditional locations, one of these interpretive signs is being installed near the parking lot of a popular souvenir shop.

Develop Outreach Tools

Two landscapes are working to engage the public in a big way. The Southern Escarpment has installed several interpretive signs to explain the benefits of prescribed fire. The signs are in high-visitation areas in Tallulah Gorge State Park, at a Georgia Power overlook (into the state park) and, interestingly, near a souvenir shop. Partners are thinking outside the box when it comes to engaging the public. The Central Escarpment Interpretive Trail will use a combination of educational signs and audio recordings to help visitors learn about the unique aspects of the Linville Gorge

Participating Organizations

- Chestatee Chattahoochee RC&D Council
- Clemson University
- Consortium of Appalachian Fire Managers and Scientists
- Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina
- Georgia Department of Natural Resources
- Georgia Forestry Commission
- Georgia ForestWatch
- National Park Service
- North Carolina Forest Service
- North Carolina Heritage Program
- North Carolina Parks and Recreation
- North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission
- South Carolina Department of Natural Resources
- South Carolina State Park Service
- Texas A&M University
- The Nature Conservancy—Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee
- The Orienne Society
- University of Tennessee
- USDA Forest Service
- Unique Places LLC
- U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
- Western Carolina University



See the two agency boundary signs? Yeah, it's hard for us to see them too. SBR FLN partners regularly conduct cooperative burns and ignore agency boundaries.

area, another popular spot with recreationists. Interpretive messages will focus on the role and history of fire (both wildfire and controlled burns), invasive and native species, and restoration efforts in this area. Unique characteristics of the landscape and ecosystem will also be emphasized.

One of the most popular stops on the workshop's field trip was the South Mountains State Park Visitors Center. Participants were treated to an interpretive presentation about fire in the mountains. One of the biggest Aha! moments for many partners was the potential impact of state parks on the public: this park alone receives 200,000 visitors a year, many of whom engage with interpretive rangers.

Share Fire Ecology Knowledge

Participants enjoyed hearing from an old friend, Dr. Charles Lafon, and his co-presenter, Dr. Adam Naito, both from Texas A&M University. Their fire history studies continue to support the idea of fire as a landscape-wide disturbance across the southern Appalachian Mountains.

As fire regimes have changed, so has the composition of the forest. USFS Southern Research Station scientists Chelcy Miniati and Kitty Elliot discussed the effects of restoration on water quality and quantity. Since about five million people get some drinking water from the southern Appalachians, participants were understandably intrigued.

Wildlife Highlight



Photo: Graydon W.P. Hidalgo

After an 80-year absence, peregrine falcons are back at Tallulah Gorge, a Southern Blue Ridge FLN focal area. According to Nathan Klaus, "Getting this apex predator back is just one more step on the road to recovering a healthy ecosystem ... and is one of the dividends, large and small, that come with restoration. I don't think it is a coincidence that the birds showed up now, after we have been working there for almost ten years. A number of birds were released there in the 1980s and 90s, prior to our restoration effort and none stayed. But now that we've got a healthy landscape they found it themselves. We already know that burning around Tallulah Gorge has increased the bird population and opened up the habitat. Peregrines are almost exclusively bird eaters and they need open habitats to hunt."

With more than 90 visitors coming to see the falcons in just the first week, it appears that healthy ecosystems are good for ecotourism as well as for falcons.



"We need to take advantage of the state park systems across our network. For example, Lake James State Park in North Carolina receives 400,000 visitors a year. We can make the argument that in terms of exposure, 10 acres in a State Park is worth 1,000 acres somewhere else because it can be shown so easily to so many visitors."

—Jamie Cameron, Park Ranger, North Carolina State Parks

Share Success Stories

Partners were excited about sharing their successes from the previous year. While North Carolina State Parks staff have been implementing growing season burns since 2004, this year they ramped up their acres in cooperation with the state Wildlife Resources Commission. The "FLN model" of larger, collaborative burns across several days is spreading across the state, even outside the boundary of the FLN. Participants emphasize that confidence rises as a result of the relationships established at our workshops.

And we are beginning to see the fruits of our labor in ecological responses. After an 80-year hiatus, peregrine falcons are back at Tallulah Gorge, a Southern Blue Ridge FLN focal area. According to Nathan Klaus, Senior Wildlife Biologist with Georgia Department of Natural Resources, "getting this apex predator back is just one more step on the road to recovering a healthy ecosystem... and is one of the dividends, large and small, that come with restoration."

Conclusion

With a history of well-attended annual workshops, numerous smaller collaborative projects, and sharing tools through webinars and other means, the SBR FLN has developed many strong working partnerships. The goals established at the first workshop back in 2007 continue to serve us well.

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One of our partners is offering hoodies with a bold message to all of the prescribed burners in the Fire Learning Network.

The Fire Learning Network (FLN) and Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges (TRES) are 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.

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