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Prescribed Fire Training Exchange

The Niobrara Valley Preserve hosts participants from around the world interested in fire education.

By Amy Kucera

More than 100 students, professional firefighters, researchers and local managers gathered near Johnstown for the fifth annual Prescribed Fire Training Exchange (TRES) at The Nature Conservancy's Niobrara Valley Preserve held on March 8-22. Trainees traveled from all over the country, as well as overseas, to conduct prescribed fire operations on 3,200 acres of various private, public and state lands.

"Fire is a need, no matter what type of ecosystem," said Jose Duce, a Helitak Crew Boss from Spain.

As more than 80 percent of vegetation growing in the U.S. is fire dependent, prescribed fire is a key tool shaping and maintaining a healthy natural landscape.

"We are drawing from lessons learned in Great Plains – the neighbors helping neighbors philosophy – to design a way to share responsibilities for implementing controlled burns," said Jeremy Bailey, TRES incident commander and the national fire training coordinator with The Nature Conservancy in Salt Lake City.

Bailey describes the training as an opportunity to "work together to increase the use of prescribed fire to improve forage and habitat for wildlife, range conditions and human safety."

Kelly Corman, coordinating wildlife biologist for the Northern Prairies Land Trust in Bassett, has regular conversations with landowners about the use of fire to control encroaching native and invasive species.

"It's an economic issue in terms of loss of forage, as well as an ecological concern," Corman said.

He regularly invites landowners to join him on "pasture drives" to take a closer look their land, particularly the intrusion of red cedars.

"When you get underneath the trees and look at what's actually growing beneath, it can be eye-opening," Corman said.



A prescribed burn at Smith Falls State Park near Valentine was part of the Prescribed Fire Training Exchange.

This training provides the logistics, planning and organization skills that fire practitioners need to be prepared in all types of situations.

"We have to communicate effectively to use fire responsibly," Bailey said. "In places around the world, we are working with people, including tribes and local communities, to reestablish the use of fire on the landscape."

While in Nebraska, crews had to adjust to the challenges of unpredictable spring weather, including tent camping in sub-zero temperatures and vehicles stuck in the sand and mud.

The training was an opportunity for participants with all levels of experience to acquire more practice. "Education is the key," said Amy Hunnewell, in her fourth year of fighting fires with a hand crew in Utah.

The Conservancy has been using fire for 50 years, with experiential training during the last 20, bringing together numerous agencies and organizations to assist landowners in the use of prescribed burns.

The Preserve is also no stranger to fire. What started as a lightning strike on the property ended in a destructive wildfire that scorched more than

29,000 acres of the Preserve, and more than 62,000 acres in the Niobrara River valley during the "Fairfield Creek Fire" during the summer of 2012.

The training was a collaboration between the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, Firestorm, Fire Learning Network, Nebraska Forest Service, Nebraska Environmental Trust, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Niobrara Council, U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"The personal relationships you establish are important. It feels like a family here in Nebraska," Duce said.

Additionally, Pheasants Forever and the Great Plains Fire Science Exchange joined forces to host a second exchange in the Loup River Valley, which included an additional 12 firefighters from Spain.

The use of prescribed fire is growing throughout the nation, and beyond.

"Word of mouth, people are starting to change their minds," Duce said. "We are spreading the news." ■



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