



Fire Learning Network Notes from the Field

Lighting up a New Path: The Women in Fire Prescribed Fire Training Exchange

Northern California
October 19-28, 2016

**Training. Empowering. Networking.
Powerful. Supportive.
Transformative.**

Skimming through the evaluation forms for the recent Women in Fire Prescribed Fire Training Exchange—WTREX—these are the kinds of words that appear again and again. Like most TREC events that take place across the country every year, the WTREX provided quality training for participants with diverse expertise, affiliations and geographies. But unlike any other prescribed fire training event to date, the WTREX focused on women in fire, explicitly recognizing and reinforcing the importance of female perspectives, and providing a supportive environment for women and men to understand and elevate the need for diversity—not only in numbers, but also in approach.

When the U.S. fire management system was conceived in the early 1900s, women's roles in the workforce were much different than they are now. But even today, women constitute a relatively small proportion of the workforce, filling 10 percent of wildland fire positions and just 7 percent of leadership roles. In recent years, there has been an increased effort to recruit women into fire, but the social and cultural challenges remain. Women often find the dominant fire management system to be dismissive of female perspectives and strengths—even as its increasing complexity requires fresh approaches and insights.

The WTREX was based on the idea that women have unique talents and perspectives, and so can play a critical role in advancing fire problem-solving together with men. The WTREX, which took place in northern California in late October 2016, invited both women and



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“I didn't really know what to expect, but I can definitely say that I didn't expect such a powerful 10 days that was going to alter my perception and goals for my future in fire.”



Left, from top: WTREX participants gather their gear and prepare for an operational briefing on a ranch in Trinity County.

The holding boss briefs her crew before ignitions on a private ranch near Hayfork. WTREX participants consistently remarked on how special it was to look around during briefings and see so many female fire practitioners in one place. © Lenya Quinn-Davidson

The firing crew checks in while burning the 18-acre unit on the ranch near Hayfork. Kelly Martin (NPS)



Below: A videographer from the University of California joined the WTREX for three days to gather video footage and interviews, including with this landowner who hosted WTREX for two days of burning on his Hayfork ranch.

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men to explore the growing role of women in fire management, while also conducting prescribed fire operations designed to advance their formal qualifications in wildland fire management and enhance their understanding of fire ecology and effects, communications and outreach, and other topics related to prescribed fire.

Building Skills and Knowledge

During their 10 days together, the 45-person team worked on private and federal lands throughout northwestern California, implementing broadcast burns and pile burns in open grasslands, deciduous oak woodlands and chaparral. Like all TRES, the WTREX gave a diverse group of participants a rare and valuable opportunity to engage in hands-on fire training together; WTREX participants included ecologists, foresters, students, researchers and others, working alongside those with the more traditional fire suppression backgrounds who usually predominate in traditional training offerings. At WTREX, 24 incident trainees had opportunities to work on position task books, with assignments ranging from Firefighter 1 to Fire Effects Monitor to Firing Boss to Burn Boss, and almost everything in between. Of these, eight trainees received final evaluations and were recommended for agency certification.

In fire, such training opportunities are limited, so it can be difficult for people to build and maintain qualifications. For women in fire, the hurdles can be even more pronounced—highly coveted training slots often go to men, who are not only more numerous, but also tend to be more comfortable speaking up, seizing limited opportunities and pushing themselves in what is typically a male-dominated environment. The WTREX provided a rare opportunity for women to train with and learn from other women, the value of which cannot be overstated. One woman commented that she received more training in her first four days at WTREX than she'd had in six years on a fire crew. Other women, working on their faller (chainsaw) qualifications, commented on the value of learning that type of skill from another woman—someone who understands their musculature and the challenges and strengths of the female build, and can offer techniques and advice accordingly.

Lacey England, USDA Forest Service, Montana:

I've been in fire suppression for seven years and have always loved the work, but it's been difficult to keep coming back each season to a culture that doesn't feel accommodating to women. Not to say that there aren't fabulous people in the fire community, but we have some work to do as an entire group on creating a new culture that encourages diversity of all kinds. Events like WTREX are essential to creating this new culture—one that develops and solicits different perspectives, new ideas, innovative approaches to problem-solving, and connection. Before WTREX, I spent a lot of time trying to decide if it was still worth it to keep fighting fire—did I love the work enough to continue existing in a community that didn't feel welcoming? I can't say that now the answer is suddenly clear and everything is fixed. But I can say that the women and men I met there have inspired me. They've made me believe that we are capable of creating a new kind of fire community that can be a good fit for anyone who wants to be a part of it.



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Miller Bailey, Hotshot Crew Member, Utah:

I'll never forget the way I felt on that first day, setting up my tent, and there were just women everywhere. And I thought to myself, 'What am I doing here?' So I told myself that I'm just here to burn, like any other TRES. But when we did introductions later that day, I could hardly talk because I was so nervous.

From an operational fire perspective, the WTREX wasn't that different from my usual experience. We were all firefighters—all there to get the job done. I've never operated with that many women before, but it didn't change the idea of it as a TRES. But the discussions and the speakers were different. The WTREX created a safe space for everyone to talk, to learn and burn together. It was so cool.

The thing that hit me the hardest was that there is a very big problem in fire, and that I'm a part of the problem. I've always thought I was a good guy, but through the discussions at WTREX, listening to all these women speak candidly about their experiences as women in a man's world, I realized how complicated the problems are. It's not simple. And I found myself guilty of using common language and terms that are hurtful, of being degrading without even meaning to. I'm conscious of these problems now, and I'll be able to self-evaluate and check myself from now on. I'll also share these things with the people I love—my crew—not in a confrontational way, but in a 'Hey man, do you know how that might make people feel?' kind of way.

Those 10 days were full of so much pain, so many special moments, so much learning. I feel selfish because I think I took away more from the WTREX than anyone else who was there. I thought I was just there to burn, but I didn't see any of this other stuff coming. The WTREX was a magical event.

Beyond hands-on training, WTREX featured presentations and workshops by various experts, including scientists, agency and community leaders, and others who are leading innovative and inspiring work in fire. A person's typical day at WTREX might have included breakfast with Jeanne Pincha-Tulley, who was on the leadership team for the event and is one of only two female Type 1 Incident Commanders in the country; a one-on-one conversation on the fireline with Sarah McCaffrey, a preeminent fire social scientist who joined the WTREX for the full 10 days; an evening presentation by Eric Knapp, a leading research ecologist with the USDA Forest Service Pacific Southwest Research Station; and a nightcap of flash presentations by WTREX participants, who all had great stories to tell. Each day was rich with information and learning—some formal and some informal—and participants walked away with varied and often unexpected new knowledge to complement their fireline skills.

Diversity = Resilience

As the start of WTREX drew closer, sunny October days gave way to a historic storm across the Pacific Northwest, with an “atmospheric river” drenching northwestern California on the weekend before WTREX—not exactly the weather the team had hoped for. However, the beauty of the TRES model is that it's resilient—diversity in burn units, hosts and fuel types opens up options and gives TRES events flexibility to navigate bad weather and other unanticipated issues. This was true for WTREX; some schedule changes and a few sunny days had the group broadcast burning on the second day of the event, just days after the remarkable deluge.

Weather aside, the WTREX took the core TRES philosophy of diversity and resilience to a new level, building in not only the usual geographic and ecological diversity, but also diversity in perspectives, experiences and ways of operating. In addition to the usual wide array of topics covered in a TRES, the agenda was sprinkled with workshops and facilitated discussions about the culture of fire, the power of language, and the careful balance of work life and home life. But the informal story-telling and sharing that happened during meals, on the fireline and around the campfire were

Laurel Schablein, The Nature Conservancy, Virginia:

Before I ever held a torch in my hand, I worked for nearly two years for The Nature Conservancy in a program that uses prescribed fire not only as the primary restoration tool, but as a catalyst for a strong partnership that promotes more good fire on the ground across agency boundaries. In all that time, most of my work was focused around fire in some way or another and I was gaining some degree of understanding about the science, fire behavior and the culture. Though I loved the occasional day on the fireline, I had decided that the life of most of my colleagues was not one I would enjoy. So I was brimming with reservations about coming to WTREX: two weeks of long, physically and mentally exhausting days with a big group of new people sounded terrifying...but also like a great approach to heaps of professional and personal growth.

It was more than I could have ever expected. With a focus on training, operations during a TRES can be slowed down to a pace allowing for more questions, more thorough answers, and training opportunities you can't always get on a typically fast-paced prescribed burn. I gathered a whole new suite of tips for wielding a 14-pound chainsaw that left me feeling 100 percent more confident. More importantly, I have never been in company so full of strength, intelligence, compassion and empathy...it became perfectly clear to me why people crave the lifestyle of fire camp. For two weeks, I was part of a community that ate together, worked together, bunked together and supported one another.

I am back home to my regular duties now and I feel a lasting effect of the mentorship and the inspiration the training cultivated. This Women-in Fire TRES was so important to every single participant in different ways and I am obliged to those who made it possible and to every participant who enriched the experience.



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Sarah McCaffrey, Fire Social Scientist, USDA Forest Service Rocky Mountain Research Station:

Coming from another part of the field, my key takeaways from participating in WTREX included seeing the thoughtfulness and passion that participants put into conducting burns, and the care that is put into assessing how to meet the goals of the burn while looking out for the safety of all participants. I was also impressed by the complexities of conducting a burn: I knew that doing a prescribed burn was no simple matter. But I was still impressed by the all the different roles, the amount of prep work that is done before ever getting to the field, and the attention paid to the communication protocols and briefings on the day of the burns.

But perhaps the best part of being part of the training was the opportunity to interact with such an impressive group of people, experience their passion for fire management, and the effort they are willing to put into ensuring the best outcomes possible, for everyone. I have had some great opportunities in my 15 years with the USFS but this was one of the most positive—and fun—activities I have been involved in to date.

at least as powerful. The focus on diverse perspectives—fostered with great intent and care by the organizers—enabled a learning and sharing environment that far exceeded anyone’s expectations. In the evaluation forms gathered at the close, it was this aspect of WTREX—the community, the support network, the safe space, the strikingly novel fire culture that naturally emerged at WTREX—that participants wanted to see emulated at a broader scale. There was widespread agreement that hosting more WTREX events would be a critical step toward a more inclusive, resilient fire management culture, and plans are underway for WTREX 2017.

“The learning environment was so supportive, I didn’t even have to think about being confident. It just happened.”

“Never would’ve guessed that the Women’s TREX would be so informative and transformative for me.”



During the WTREX, three participants were able to work on their faller qualifications. These trainees all noted the value of learning chainsaw skills from other women, who were able to give advice based on strengths and challenges specific to women.

Photo: Kelly Martin (NPS)

Emily Gubler, Lyons Fire Department, Colorado:

I slept in my tent, put on my Nomex pants and chilly boots every morning and filled my water bottles at night. I kept a mental tally of how much water was in the engine, where the drip torches and jerry cans were, and how close we were to lunch. I wore my pack, carried my combi-tool, hiked up and down hills, and worried about poison oak. This is the fire world I know.

At the morning briefings, all but one of the IMT members were women. The Burn Bosses—holding briefings in front of maps taped to trucks—were women. The Holding Bosses and Firing Bosses were almost all women. The firing teams and holding crews were mostly women. My Engine Boss trainer was a woman. I briefed the women working on my engine.

There were women who had never been on a fire, and pack-tested on the first day of the training. There were women hotshots, social scientists, engine captains, academics, ecologists, and heli-rappellers. There was a Type I IC (a woman), and another woman who is a Type I Operations trainee. Women from the U.S., Canada, and Spain. (And men from Portugal and Spain.) Women from local, state, federal and private agencies.

This is not the fire world I know. This is a new fire world, and I thoroughly, thoroughly enjoyed it.

How to explain how powerful this experience was? It was powerful; it was healing; it was motivating; it was inspiring; it was energizing. I watched women leaders collaborate, listening to others for information and ideas and then making clear decisions. I experienced some of the most honest and educational AARs I’ve ever been a part of. I heard women ask questions and express difficulties that I’ve had, and I saw women answer those questions and offer solutions.

On the fireline, I had conversations about emotional labor, about finding gloves, pants, and boots that fit, about quilts, and about the struggles of choosing (or not) to change one’s last name with marriage. I celebrated the awesomeness of madrone trees and a ponderosa full of holes from woodpeckers, each hole containing a squirrel’s acorn. I heard painful stories about difficult work environments and home situations. I felt the most comfortable I have ever felt asking questions. I laughed, and listened, and lit fires, and started pumps, and supported and was supported by women.

For me, seeing women doing the jobs of Firing Boss, Burn Boss, Operations and Incident Command is a big deal. Something happens in me when I see women responding to a broken sway bar on an engine or recognizing that the winds aren’t matching the predicted winds. Again I struggle to explain what it is that happens—it is a positive shift, a door opening, a freeing.

In short, it was an amazingly wonderful experience, one I recommend for everyone.



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Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges and the Fire Learning Network 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. For more about PERFACT, contact Lynn Decker: ldecker@tnc.org or (801) 320-0524.



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