Loess Hills Prescribed Fire Training Exchange  
April 2013

In the Loess Hills of western Iowa, land managers, farmers and municipal fire departments are working together to improve the prairies and pastures for forage, wildlife habitat and scenic beauty. Firefighters from federal, state, county, private and municipal departments from six states—Iowa, Kansas, Ohio, Utah, Wisconsin and Wyoming—arrived in the first week of April to exchange knowledge and experience while completing numerous controlled burns. The crews, made up of both seasoned fire professionals and new recruits, are working with land managers in the Loess Hills to practice and improve their prescribed fire skills while also providing a much needed benefit to the land. “What a great learning opportunity,” said Bob Buhr of the Bureau of Land Management in Wyoming.

Kyle Lapham, the FLN landscape leader and Loess Hills Fire Coordinator for The Nature Conservancy, noted that “Iowa is a prairie state, but only a tenth of one percent of Iowa’s native prairies remain, and the largest intact tracts are here in the Loess Hills. Fire has long played an important role in the prairies and forests of North America, so if we want to protect our water and soils, we need to keep good fire on the landscape.” The controlled burns that do that job are planned weeks and sometimes months in advance; burn plans are written by the land owner and burns are conducted only when the weather is just right.

This training started with the participants spending half a day in the classroom learning about local ecology and burn planning, and working with a local meteorologist to understand the weather patterns and forecasts for the area. Participants then went out and burned 33 acres at Farm Creek Public Wildlife Area near Carson, Iowa.

After a week of good fire weather, rain and snow moved in, but the training exchange kept going strong. “There are lots of folks here who are eager to do fire. When the weather isn’t favorable for burning, we still have days full of activities.” said Kyle Lapham, The Nature Conservancy’s Loess Hills Fire Coordinator. “We scout, plan, and prep units so we don’t waste a minute when we get good fire weather.”

In addition to those activities, firefighters have valuable time to learn from each other’s experience and knowledge, whether fire related or not. As Michele Witecha of the
Kansas Forest service put it, “It’s almost like a conference environment. We’re taking advantage of pooled knowledge from all over the country. I’m learning so much from presentations by participants about different regions and programs. There’s also a lot of giving and receiving input and advice about challenges people are facing in their day-to-day jobs.”

Other activities included a very realistic fire scenario exercise, presentations from county, municipal, state, federal, and private partners, safety discussions and equipment training.

Over the course of two weeks, the 35 firefighters participating in this exchange applied much-needed fire to about 200 acres on state and county lands, and completed black-lining and other preparations on an 850-acre unit that local crews will now be able to treat in the near future.

Participants practiced simulating the sequence of lighting and holding using scenario-based exercises with maps and weather and fire behavior descriptions. To add to the realism, participants were physically separated during the exercise, requiring all instructions, commands and actions to be communicated by radio.

The Fire Learning Network is supported by Promoting Ecosystem Resiliency through Collaboration: Landscapes, Learning and Restoration, a cooperative agreement between The Nature Conservancy, USDA Forest Service and agencies of the Department of the Interior. For more information about the FLN, contact Lynn Decker at ldecker@tnc.org or (801) 320-0524.

For more information, contact:

Kyle Lapham
klpham@tnc.org
(712) 309-6473

An equal opportunity provider