



Fire Learning Network Notes from the Field

Central Appalachians FLN 2015 Year in Review

Over the last decade, the Central Appalachians FLN has built strong, diverse partnerships and demonstrated the synergistic effect this level of collaboration can have in restoring the role of fire to an ecologically significant scale.

Good Fire

Despite a wet start to the 2015 prescribed fire season in many parts of the region, landscape partners were able to burn nearly 8,700 acres in the Heart of the Appalachians, 12,900 acres in the Keystone Appalachians and 6,200 acres in the Cumberland River landscapes this year. Achieving 28,000 acres of good fire across the network can be attributed to the increased coordination among partners making the most of small burn windows.

Among the highlights was the 400-acre Summers Mountain burn in the Highland Wildlife Management Area. Thanks to the FLN's role in helping develop a new prescribed fire policy for the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF) and MOUs between all partners, this was both the largest burn in DGIF history and the first in Virginia where U.S. Forest Service staff have burned on DGIF lands.

Excellent cross-boundary coordination was also evidenced by The Nature Conservancy staff from Maryland assisting the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (PADCNR) with the Underwood Trail Burn near State College, while Conservancy staff from Pennsylvania were assisting the Pennsylvania Game Commission with another burn. Successful

Landscapes of the Central Appalachians FLN

Heart of the Appalachians
Keystone Appalachians
Cumberland River
Potomac Headwaters

Virginia / West Virginia
Pennsylvania
Kentucky
Maryland / West Virginia

collaboration in Pennsylvania's Keystone Appalachians landscape also allowed for burning across Pennsylvania Game Commission, Fort Indiantown Gap, PADCNR and Conservancy lands.



Partners burning in the Cumberland River landscape.
Photo: Chris Minor/TNC

The success of this crew led the chapter to again contract with WRI, this time through a participating agreement funded by a Forest Service Supplemental Wildland Fire Hazardous Fuels (WFHF) project, to provide a four-person module for the spring of 2016. With additional funding from the Forest Service Region 8, two more modules will be supported in the Southern Blue Ridge FLN. The three modules—based in Virginia, North Carolina/Tennessee and Georgia/South Carolina—will be available for three months, for work spanning state, federal, local and private lands.

Tackling Capacity Barriers

A frequently identified barrier to prescribed fire implementation is insufficient capacity. To help mitigate that challenge, the Conservancy's Virginia chapter, funded through a Scaling-up to Promote Ecosystem Resiliency (SPER II) grant, contracted with Wildland Restoration International (WRI) to provide a four-person fire module in the spring of 2015. The module helped prep and implement controlled burns on 2,942 acres in the Heart of the Appalachians landscape and prepped another 1,344 acres for upcoming burns.



The leader of the Wildland Restoration International module conducting ignitions at the Bear Loop burn unit on Warm Springs Mountain Preserve in April 2015. Also pictured is one of the interpretive signs developed by the FLN, which carries information about the role of fire—including prescribed fire—in the landscape.

Photo: Marek Smith/TNC

Continuous Collaboration

In western Maryland, development of a new FLN landscape—the Potomac Headwaters FLN landscape—was initiated in early November. Staff from the Maryland Department of Forestry, Maryland Department of Natural Resources, National Park Service and the Conservancy's Maryland and Virginia chapters spent two days discussing project goals and touring prospective burn units in Catoctin Mountain Park and Green Ridge State Forest. While partners from Maryland have long participated in the Central Appalachians FLN, they had not yet developed a large landscape upon which they could collaboratively implement cross-boundary projects. With this now underway, partners in the new landscape are planning for a workshop later in 2016.

In Kentucky this fall, a Cumberland River FLN landscape workshop was attended by 12 people from the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, Kentucky Heartwood, The Nature Conservancy and the U.S. Forest Service. Three subcommittees were formed—to focus on funding, research and outreach—to better manage upcoming opportunities. Plans for the next six months include hosting a local FLN Shared-Learning Field Day where key people in FLN partner agencies will have the opportunity to hear about recent research, see treatment sites, and address concerns or issues around controlled burning in the area.

In Pennsylvania, the Prescribed Fire Council's Dry Oak and Fire workshops were well attended, drawing 128 participants from 18 organizations and agencies, including state and federal agencies, traditional NGOs, academia, forestry associations, forestry products companies, consulting foresters and hunters. They discussed prescribed fire and management of dry oak and oak-pine communities, covering issues ranging from maintaining oak forests to restoring woodlands, savannas and scrub oak-pitch pine barrens with combinations of fire, timber harvest and other methods.



Ben Jones addressed participants at one of the stops on the Dry Oak and Fire Workshop field tour. Photo: Patrick McElhenny/TNC

Training Modules

An S-219 Fire Operations course was held in July in State College (PA) under the sponsorship of the Pennsylvania Game Commission. There were 28 participants, including students and instructors from the Pennsylvania Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, Pennsylvania Game Commission and the Conservancy's Pennsylvania chapter.

An RX-310 Fire Effects course was sponsored by the Pennsylvania Prescribed Fire Council in July as well. The 26 participants in the week-long course included students and instructors from Arcadia University,

Natural Lands Trust, National Park Service, Pennsylvania Bureau of Forestry, Pennsylvania Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, Pennsylvania Game Commission, Sustainable Solutions (a natural resource consulting company) and the Conservancy's Pennsylvania chapter.

The Virginia Wildland Fire Academy, coordinated by the Virginia Department of Forestry, held its first NWCG Prescribed Fire Course, Rx310 Fire Effects, in 2015. The course was co-hosted by the Virginia Prescribed Fire Council. This significant milestone was met with enthusiasm: a sold out classroom, and tremendous participation by essentially every land management agency in the state as well as from many private landowners and contractors. In the coming year, the Academy will continue its support of prescribed fire training by offering Rx341 Prescribed Fire Plan Preparation.

Outreach Efforts

Educational outreach targeting visitors to areas where prescribed fire is part of the landscape continues to be a focus of the network.

RESTORING A FIRE ADAPTED LANDSCAPE

Prescribed Burning

A fire adapted landscape is an area created and maintained by fire. Some trees and other plants benefit from fire, as it reduces excess woody debris from the forest floor, promotes seed germination, and reduces competition. Many areas within Kentucky's forests need to be much more open than they are now.

Prairie, savanna, woodland, and forest are general terms used to describe different habitat types defined by the density of trees in a given area. A mixture of different habitat types across a landscape adds to plant and wildlife diversity.

The eight (east) side of 5016, and the south of KY 90 represent two treatment areas. Both areas will be mechanically thinned with one receiving an early spring or late fall controlled burn while the other receives a late spring, summer, or late summer controlled burn. Pre- and post-burn data will be collected, and results will guide future management decisions.

Combined with controlled burning, mechanical thinning can speed up the restoration process.

Thinning allows less desirable trees to be harvested and the understorey to be opened up. This provides more sunlight to the forest floor and encourages more plants to grow.

Monitoring plots are located throughout this area. Data is collected, including plant species, species occurrence, tree size, and fuel load. This allows the impact of treatments to be better defined and documented.

PRAIRIE
Photo: Chris Jones

SAVANNA
Photo: Chris Jones

WOODLAND
Photo: Chris Jones

FOREST
Photo: Chris Jones

The photos above provide a visual of the different habitat types represented in our forests. Many wildlife species are in decline due to lack of their associated habitat type.

Partners in the Cumberland River FLN landscape continued work on interpretive signs for the Stearns Ranger District of the Daniel Boone National Forest. The signs are part of driving tour being developed with support from the Consortium of Appalachian Fire Managers and Scientists. The tour will have eight to ten stops and feature messages about the historic role of fire in the Appalachians; fire effects monitoring; plant, wildlife and fuel reduction benefits of controlled burns; and fire teams and safety.

The Central Appalachians FLN was represented at the Association for Fire Ecology's 6th International Fire Ecology and Management Congress in San Antonio (TX) by Nikole Swaney (TNC), Beth Buchanan (USFS) and Lindsey Curtin (USFS). Their presentations detailed fire effects monitoring efforts and adaptive management for the Southern Region of the Forest Service and the Central Appalachians. Nikole Swaney also presented a poster on the upcoming Women in Fire Training Exchange that will be hosted by the Northern California Prescribed Fire Council in the fall of 2016. Partners from the Pennsylvania Game Commission also gave a presentation based on initial results of the second year of a dendrochronology fire history study being undertaken with the University of Missouri Tree Ring Lab.



Nikole Swaney with the Women in TREX poster at the AFE Congress. Photo: Wendy Fulks/TNC

Annual Workshop

More than 60 participants from 20 agencies attended the joint workshop held by the Consortium of Appalachian Fire Managers and Scientists (CAFMS) and the Central Appalachians FLN in October. CAFMS coordinated a fire history workshop that brought together many of the pioneers of Central Appalachians dendrochronological, soil and peat charcoal, witness tree and other techniques used to develop current understanding of the historic fire regime in the Central Appalachians. The FLN then hosted presentations on collaborative success stories, new technological tools, northern long-eared bats and fire effects monitoring. The joint workshop helped reinforce the long-standing ties between science and management in the region.



Top: The annual FLN Partnership Award was presented to Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries for their tenacity and commitment to building fire management capacity within their agency, collaborative planning and implementation across organizational boundaries. Bottom: Soil charcoal sampling during the workshop field tour.

Photos: Laurel Schablein/TNC, Marek Smith/TNC

Upcoming Meetings

Pennsylvania Prescribed Fire Council Annual Conference

February 16-17, 2016

Speakers from across the country will discuss fire and forest bats; Pennsylvania's fire history; public perceptions of prescribed fire; canopy tree mortality after burns; fire's role in snowshoe hare habitat; wildland fire GIS, mapping apps, and devices; statewide prescribed fire updates, lessons learned and more!

Online registration:
<http://www.paprescribedfire.org/training/2016-annual-conference.html>

Central Appalachians FLN Annual Workshop

November 2-3, 2016

Wintergreen Resort, Virginia

Save the date and stay tuned for more.

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Links to products of the Central Appalachians FLN, including reports, posters, interpretive signs and brochure and other materials can be found on the network's Conservation Gateway page at:

<http://www.conservationgateway.org/ConservationPractices/FireLandscapes/FireLearningNetwork/RegionalNetworks/Pages/CentralApps.aspx>



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