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## FOCUS ON CAPACITY:

# BUILDING CAPACITY THAT DISTRIBUTES POWER AND HONORS LOCAL KNOWLEDGE AND LEADERSHIP

The U.S. has been centralizing fire management capability for nearly a century. This affords certain efficiencies and expertise to develop, but also concentrates power and homogenizes our fire culture. The country does not have a single, monolithic “fire problem.” Rather, we have hundreds of local and regional problems (and opportunities!) that differ in many important details. These situations require a range of options and capacities—and flexibility. And the communities addressing them need a system of knowledge sharing, relationships and actions that enable local solutions to land and fire management and, ultimately, resilience.

## Complex Problems Call for New Approaches

PERFACT supports community-based leaders who are creating new approaches to fire management and community resilience. The partnership’s fire networks are designed to help transition from a centralized model “owned” by specialized professionals, to a model of decentralized approaches to fire management driven by local conditions, needs and assets.

To reach our collective goals of resilient landscapes and communities and more sustainable fire management systems, we need a capacity-building model that will support local leaders and strengthen the organizations and partnerships that house their work. Such a distributed approach to fire management requires many more people taking part, bringing a variety of skills, assets, visions and leadership to play roles in fire preparedness, management and recovery in their communities and landscapes.

## What Do We Mean by Capacity?

Fire management capacity is a broad concept. It is far more than crews skilled in safely suppressing wildfires and conducting prescribed burns when time permits. We need to increase prescribed fire, for example. This requires training more

“ We have been so inspired by FAC Net processes and values that we are designing our statewide program to reflect many of these elements: collaborative, stakeholder-driven and learner-centric. We are using many tools learned from FAC Net in our own work. We are connecting communities for sharing and learning in new and creative ways. We are providing them with resources to build their capacity to engage their communities and neighbors and take action on the ground as a collective. We are also planning additional opportunities for learning and connecting ... highlighting communities that have experienced successes.

## What is PERFACT?

Promoting Ecosystem Resilience and Fire Adapted Communities Together is a cooperative agreement between The Nature Conservancy, USDA Forest Service and agencies of the Department of the Interior. The agreement supports the Fire Learning Network (since 2002), Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges (2008), Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network (2013), Indigenous Peoples Burning Network (2016) and other efforts that bring people together to collectively identify and meet our wildfire challenges.

## Different Places, Different Approaches

Even something as straightforward as “getting more boots on the ground” takes different forms in different places. Over the past few years, PERFACT has supported the development of at least three models that are adapted to the needs of different places:

- In a model developed for landscapes dominated by public lands in the Appalachians, traveling prescribed fire modules support burns prioritized by partners working across jurisdictions. The Central Appalachians and Southern Blue Ridge FLNs managed four such modules this year. [\(READ MORE\)](#)
- The All Hands All Lands burn team was developed by the Forest Stewards Guild to support burns on private and public lands throughout the Rio Grande Water Fund landscape in northern New Mexico, while providing a career path for underserved youth. [\(READ MORE\)](#)
- In 2016, we introduced private landowners in Humboldt County, California, to the prescribed burn association model used in the Great Plains. PBAs are now spreading rapidly in the state. [\(READ MORE\)](#)



## Local Capacity for Local Priorities

For the last dozen years, landscapes across the country have been offering TRES, with each event tailored to the needs of the landscape and the participants it draws. For example, the annual fall Klamath River TRES in northern California has increasingly focused on training a local workforce; the burning they conduct supports collaborative forest resilience projects, priority fuels mitigation work for communities, and cultural burning with tribal partners. Over the last several years, they have built a community of burners who know the region, are used to working together, and can come together on short notice. This spring, with much burning cancelled or limited due to COVID-19, organizers were able to recruit local TRES “alumni” to complete a long-awaited cultural burn when a brief window of opportunity opened. [\(READ MORE\)](#)

people as burn bosses, of course, but it often means getting them access to insurance. And much of the needed capacity has nothing to do with formal qualifications and drip-torches. We need local workforces that can support resident home hardening and mitigation—people trained in assessing a home’s wildfire risk, and folks with the skills and tools to do the retrofit work. If we want codes and ordinances that regulate development in fire-prone landscapes, we need planners and local government to be well-versed in fire issues. Businesses need to plan for continuity and long-term recovery. Individuals may need access to information about how to mitigate smoke effects. Neighborhoods may need to plan for evacuations. And virtually every community needs organizers—to bring people together, facilitate planning and build the most critical element of resilience: connections.

Each community has unique risks, a unique set of capacities and unique goals. Aligning those as they build a more closely connected relationship with fire is what the fire networks enable.

## How Capacity Gets Built Matters

Our approach to capacity building can’t be just more of what we have now. The needed systems change will require the right capacities, at the right times, in the right places. At its best, capacity-building can be transformative, creating access to information, ideas, resources, peers and power. At its worst, capacity-building can be imperialistic and disenfranchising. The difference is in the details and deployment.

Capacity-building is often conceptualized as a solution “given to” communities that are viewed as poor, underdeveloped, uninformed or otherwise lacking. The logic is, “If only these people had this information (or other resource), we could solve their problem.” But, in fire management the problem is rarely one of purely information or resource deficit. Change requires new ways of working, not just the universal implementation of “best practices” from on high. Best management practices optimize outcomes in predictable systems; they do not shift power dynamics or help us manage complexity. So when building capacity for adaptable community fire management, we look to community organizing, social justice and assets-based development work. We don’t just bring tools to communities; we work with them.

## Our Approach to Building Capacity

PERFACT has been helping dozens of communities and landscape partnerships build their capacity for nearly two decades. One of the most important things we’ve learned is that there is no single curriculum for this work that will set people up to successfully reach the goal. Why not? Because lasting change comes from true ownership, skill development and practice. So we invest in local leaders, support peer learning and connection, create access and make learning spaces where people are valued and power is built. We

support groups undertaking strategic planning processes—rather than assuming we know their communities better than they do and imposing strategies from the outside. Our capacity-building approach honors the technical expertise and knowledge that is needed to resolve some aspects of the challenge, while also investing in the leadership development, learning orientation and emphasis on connection that will make the capacity adaptable and enduring.

## Recent Investments in Capacity-Building

PERFACT supported a broad range of capacity-building experiences for members and partners this year. We held technical workshops and hosted training events in prescribed fire and Community Wildfire Protection Planning. Professional development opportunities included a series of workshops on diversity, equity and inclusion, as well as coaching in facilitation techniques and virtual meeting design. Lessons learned through the Indigenous Peoples Burning Network were shared and explored in a pilot Beginners' Working Group for non-indigenous land managers from The Nature Conservancy to begin to build equitable relationships with tribes.

The opportunities offered were informed by member priorities, first through insight gained at our annual workshops, and then revised when the COVID-19 pandemic struck. As all of our operating realities were suddenly turned upside down, we immediately asked members what they needed to stay effective and advance their goals. We were able to quickly adjust our plans and support based on this feedback and continue to make progress in spite of the challenges.

### **We are deploying capacity-building support in a virtual world.**

Our networks support leaders from 34 states and reach practitioners from 13 countries. The only practical way to keep those folks connected—sharing ideas, questioning what is possible and learning together—is through virtual learning spaces. The activities we supported this year were made possible because we listened to the needs of our members, and connected those people and organizations through a robust virtual system that supports peer learning and local action. The learning spaces we've built facilitate the transfer of ideas while keeping communication and ideas transparent and adaptable. We work hard to manage power dynamics that might disenfranchise participants, while encouraging critique and hard questions. Our PERFACT team works remotely across the country, and we have been operating virtual spaces for the past decade, so when COVID-19 required universal adoption of virtual engagement this spring, we were ahead of the curve.

**A little boost can make the difference between a successful project and loss of momentum.** Volunteer and grassroots groups across the country are mobilizing fire resilience projects in their communities. Many FAC Net affiliates lead or belong to these kinds of groups; in listening to their ideas for how we could support their capacity-building needs we heard that they



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FIRE ADAPTED COMMUNITIES LEARNING NETWORK

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FAC Net planned to meet in Salt Lake City in April 2020 for its annual workshop. In March, due to the COVID-19 outbreak, staff realized they would need to re-plan the workshop for a virtual platform. As they redesigned sessions, they recognized that the skills and tools they were using to adapt the workshop could be valuable to others faced with moving their work online. They developed “50 Tips Guide to Virtual Workshops” to help members and other community leaders design and run great virtual convenings. (Click the image to view this resource.)



“ This roadside fuel break was the most important deliverable in our community Wildfire Action Plan because the road was considered ‘non-survivable’ and is the community’s main road for evacuation. This road also served as an emergency evacuation route for another community of 250 homes. When we had planned the mitigation project, we had not realized that we were going to need to mark the trees by a certified forester to qualify for grants. Thanks to FAC Net, we were able hire foresters to mark the trees for the roadside fuel break, and able to complete surveying work to establish the boundaries. This work helped us complete the full project on time and on budget.

FAC Net Affiliate Member,  
recipient of Opportunity Fund support

could often benefit tremendously from a little bit of additional project funding enabling them to complete a demonstration project, or get the ball rolling on community organizing in a specific neighborhood. Based on the needs our members had articulated, FAC Net piloted an opportunity fund to support some of these projects. While funding support and capacity-building are not the same thing, giving these members the opportunity to test their partnerships, strategies and outreach by facilitating the completion of a project indirectly allowed them to strengthen those capacities. The fund makes targeted investments in on-the-ground projects that:

- need just a small boost to be completed, or a small gap in funding to be filled;
- expand the member’s fire adapted communities work into a new area or sector;
- support action in low-income or underrepresented communities; or
- serve communities recovering from wildfire.

This program launched in early 2020, and eight community projects were selected; unfortunately, the onset of COVID-19 delayed four of the projects, but the others were able to proceed as planned. These included mitigating fuels along a community’s primary evacuation road, a defensible space demonstration project conducted at the home of an elderly low-income resident, a revegetation and invasive plant control project in a neighborhood recovering from the Camp Fire, and a virtual engagement process for evacuation modeling. Together they completed 8.5 acres of treatments that improved the evacuation safety for 281 homes and engaged volunteers who provided 92 hours of service to their communities.

## Resilience in a Changing World

We believe that the kind of capacity-building we support—in leadership development; skill-, knowledge- and power-building and by fostering connections and strengthening the organizations and institutions where those leaders’ work is housed—will help us shift from a centralized fire management system to decentralized approaches that allow for more local leadership, responsibility and adaptability in our fire relationships.

Together, we are working to create tighter and more responsive connections between people, place and fire. We are supporting people to take responsibility, not just for their own homes, families and property, but for the resilience of their communities and landscapes.

For more about the Promoting Ecosystem Resilience and Fire Adapted Communities Together cooperative agreement between The Nature Conservancy, USDA Forest Service and agencies of the Department of the Interior, contact Marek Smith at [marek\\_smith@tnc.org](mailto:marek_smith@tnc.org).

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