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FOCUS ON CALIFORNIA:

## PERFACT INVESTMENTS SPARK WIDESPREAD PROGRESS

Strategic investments by PERFACT over the last dozen years are transforming California’s approach to fire management. The Fire Learning Network (FLN), Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network (FAC Net), Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges (TRES) and Indigenous Peoples Burning Network (IPBN) have helped develop a bold vision and leadership. Through innumerable individual actions, and deep and sustained partnerships, our members are shaping changes in fire management in one of the most fire-dependent places on Earth.

The role the PERFACT partnership has played in positioning and supporting California leaders to envision and act on a new approach to fire management cannot be overstated. Through investments in capacity-building, supporting diverse voices in expanded leadership roles, and enabling engagement with various state task forces and committees, the FLN, FAC Net, TRES and IPBN are directly responsible for a number of important advances, and indirectly support many more. The few examples that follow highlight the range and depth of impact that PERFACT has had on the direction of fire management in California.

### A 90% Slope With Heavy Fuel Loading in the WUI: Nightmare Parcel or Training Opportunity?

In remote communities nestled among national forest lands, the PERFACT partnership has been working to shift forest management from a suppression-focused, agency-led approach toward a future where responsibility and ownership of fire—and forest resilience—are shared by local people and organizations. Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges are a key strategy for building local fire management capacity—and serve as a focus for community conversations about fire. As the Klamath River TRES was underway in the fall of 2018, a resident of the community of Orleans expressed the culture of fire-acceptance we are striving to cultivate in a post shared on a community Facebook page:

“Tomorrow and the next day the TRES team implements the Ishi Pishi prescribed burn, one of the most technical and challenging burns of the program. Given this is directly above my home, and includes a chunk of my property, I’ve put a fair amount of thought into why we need to burn, and whether or not we should

#### 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.



After four years of waiting for the right burn window, and resources and permits to align, the firing team for the Ishi Pishi unit prepare to shuttle to the top of the unit. The average slope of the 66-acre unit—with untreated fuels from a century of fire exclusion—was about 90 percent, so lighters zig-zagged down the hill in formation for two consecutive days to safely complete the burn.

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Humboldt County PBA members burned together for three days in late June. Introducing the PBA model to California required significant groundwork, which included 26 workshops in various locations, 19 fire trainings, and more than 90 other presentations. As a result, additional PBAs are now being formed in Mendocino, Nevada and Plumas counties, and there is budding interest in many others. © Lenya Quinn-Davidson/UC Coop Extension

be burning such a challenging parcel such as this at all. What follows are a few thoughts, based both on my participation in the 2-week TREX event, as well as the other 50 weeks of the year I spend as a community member learning to live with fire.

The Ishi Pishi burn is one part of a larger plan to get good black around our community so we can be safer when wildfires happen. This [larger plan] is the product of hundreds of hours of meetings, presentations, discussions, arguments and ultimately consensus about how to best live with fire. The parcel is extremely steep, difficult to access, and contains many jackpot fuels. Are there risks involved in burning it? You bet! Are they worth it? In my opinion, yes, and here's why: For one, this year's TREX team brings years of experience implementing prescribed fire. The burn boss has 12 years of experience and has taught and coordinated all five of our Klamath River TREX trainings. He will have the support of an Incident Command Team and a team of qualified burners who also share years of local experience—as well as 3,000 feet of hose lay, a 2,000 gallon water tender, 3 engines, a 12-person holding crew, plus a CAL FIRE engine. If there was ever a time to burn on our terms, this is it.

The question is not if fire will come, but when, and under what conditions. A wildfire is likely to hit during the hottest, driest time of the year. A summer ignition on Ishi Pishi Road could result in an uphill head fire. As we've witnessed in this country, steep slopes denuded of vegetation often fail, and such an event could close the road for a significant stretch of time. A prescribed fire, lit carefully from the top and drawn down the hillside, will ideally reduce the fuel loading, leaving the neighborhood and our town safer in the event of a wildfire.

Of course, we never burn purely on our own terms. TREX aspires to introduce fire in the safest manner under the most ideal conditions, but there is no guarantee that some of the canopy on this hillside will not torch. Burning is always a partnership with forces greater than us. Yes, fire entails risks, and no one who works with fire takes those risks lightly. But at some point we need to ask ourselves, what are the risks of not burning?"

## The West's First Prescribed Burn Association Ignites Community-Based Fire Management ... and 1,000 Acres

Prescribed fire is one of the best ways to restore fire-adapted ecosystems and protect communities, but community members have largely lacked access to prescribed fire training and resources in California—until now.

Since 2016, PERFACT has supported the work of University of California Cooperative Extension advisors Lenya Quinn-Davidson and Jeffery Stackhouse in building new capacity for prescribed fire in California. A central focus has been introducing and adapting the prescribed burn association model to California. Common in rangelands elsewhere in the country, PBAs bring landowners and other community members together to plan and implement projects. PERFACT investments and networks provided targeted support, inspiration and insight—including through learning exchanges between landowners in California and PBA members from the Great Plains FLN in Nebraska.

In March 2018, the Humboldt County Prescribed Burn Association was formally established, the first of its kind in the West. Since then, the PBA has led burns on more than 1,000 acres in the county—and the model has been shared through workshops, presentations and live-fire trainings, inspiring and supporting the development of several new prescribed burn associations across the state.

Why does the prescribed burn association model work?

**Diversity:** The Humboldt County PBA sees its strength in the breadth of groups that have come to the table—ranchers, environmental nonprofits, the timber industry, students, back-to-the-landers, retired agency folks—and the diversity of burn objectives represented by those constituents, which include fuels reduction, range improvement, invasive species control, oak woodland restoration, vineyard protection and more.

**Training:** While the burns led by the Humboldt County PBA have many objectives, training is always a primary goal. Members have a wide range of backgrounds, experience levels and physical abilities, and the PBA sees each burn as an opportunity to provide safe, tailored training for every person. A core philosophy is that all interested people can and should be meaningfully incorporated into prescribed fire operations. Whether it's digging line, making lunch, hiking with a drip torch, spinning weather, taking photos or patrolling a fire line, every person can be an important part of the team. With this inclusive, training-focused approach, people feel valued and inspired to come back to the next burn.

**Capacity building:** In addition to supporting landowners, the Humboldt County PBA burns offer traditional fire practitioners training opportunities as well. The PBA has involved 11 fire departments, both volunteer and career, in their burns. This provides critical training for the departments, many of which do not have other opportunities to participate in prescribed burns, and so increases local capacity for both prescribed fire and wildfire response.

Over the last two years, there has been a marked change in the conversation about prescribed fire on private lands in California. The Humboldt County PBA is leading by example, showing that a community-based model can be successful, and that prescribed fire is an important and practical tool in the private lands toolbox.

## From Mitigation to Resilience: Community Leaders Connect, Learn and Share

Alone, a person can mitigate some of their wildfire risk. With their neighbors, people can begin to create resilience. The Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network was created to help people and communities do this more effectively, and its members are driving success in communities across the country.

Individually, Fire Safe Councils, Firewise USA® sites and collaborative groups can reduce risk at community and landscape scales. But working together, these constituencies can catalyze cultural change. This is the goal of a new regional network in California: connecting community leaders and building local capacity, empowering Californians to live safely alongside wildfire.

With PERFECT support, more than 50 community leaders from 17 California counties gathered in February 2019 to launch a North Coast regional network for fire adaptation leaders. In a workshop co-convened with the California Fire Safe Council and facilitated by FAC Net, participants learned about resident education, watershed protection, wildfire risk reduction and evacuation preparedness, and had opportunities to share best practices and skills, common challenges and needs. They were inspired by the best practices on display on a tour of the host community: intentional community design, home siting and landscaping that takes into account wildfire potential, and even a mobile crew of sheep conducting fuels reduction by grazing common areas. Together, participants identified priorities to increase fire resilience in their communities, and began building the network of peers that will help them meet their communities' needs.



Part of the power of prescribed burn associations comes from the broad array of people taking part.

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Leaders from rural villages and urban centers, from oak woodlands, mixed conifer forests and chaparral ecosystems, from nonprofits and volunteer groups, government employees and fire departments, connected around a common purpose: living better with fire in California. The posters they created to depict their work facilitated connections and netweaving.

© WRTC



Collaborative planning facilitated by the FLN helped position FireScape Mendocino and the Western Klamath Restoration Partnership to receive California Climate Investments initiative funding for fire management and forest health work. © Tehama County RCD

## A Decade of PERFECT Learning Will Guide \$20 Million Investment in Forest and Fire Capacity Building in California

California knows it has a fire problem. Its ecosystems are struggling and growing unhealthy in the absence of their natural fire regimes. Even more strikingly, the frequency and scale of catastrophic wildfires have grown at alarming rates. In recent years, the state has begun taking increasingly effective action—some of it informed by PERFECT work and partners. The new Regional Forest and Fire Capacity program, administered by the California Natural Resources Agency and Department of Conservation, acknowledges the same needs and calls for the same solutions that FLN was designed to address—collaborative planning and implementation, strengthening the workforce, and co-ownership of fire. The program is providing funding—\$20 million over the course of three years—for communities across the state to enhance their ability to restore landscape resilience to wildfire. The funds will largely be directed to the kinds of capacity-building and implementation work PERFECT has been innovating and championing.

The Watershed Research and Training Center was invited to play a key role in this program, in large part because of the work in collaborative planning and local workforce and fire restoration capacity development they’ve led in the California Klamath-Siskiyou FLN. WRTC will assist with statewide implementation of the program, and will help create the critical learning feedback loop between awardees and the state.

PERFACT, and the many demonstrations of living with fire it has supported, served, at least in part, as a model for California’s expanding investments. And WRTC’s role in helping to harvest lessons from the work, coupled with its connections through PERFECT, will help other states learn from and emulate California’s latest approaches to community-based fire management.

“ Long-term investments through FLN, TREX and FAC Net were absolutely pivotal to our positioning for this role, and we intend to continue to share with and draw on PERFECT members to ensure that the impact of this funding ripples beyond the borders of the state.

“ Our demonstrations of success across the state helped FLN partners secure four slots on the curriculum development committee for CAL FIRE’s new private burn boss qualification system. This means we should be able to have substantial influence on that pivotal process.

## PERFACT’s Community Leaders Are Shaping the Future of California

The stories above are only a small sample of the ways that PERFECT is improving California’s relationship with wildfire. In addition to supporting projects of three FLN landscapes, two FAC Net core members, an IPBN landscape and several TREX events a year, PERFECT supports and helps position numerous community leaders in the state. These leaders, in turn, are playing significant roles in state efforts—including the Capacity Working Group of the California Statewide Fire MOU Partnership, Governor’s Forest Management Task Force, CAL FIRE Native American Advisory Council, and most recently the CAL FIRE burn boss qualification system’s curriculum development committee—amplifying their ideas and advancing the co-ownership of fire.



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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