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FOCUS ON DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION:

ELEVATING DIVERSE VOICES TO SOLVE OUR FIRE CRISIS

Building equitable partnerships and elevating and listening to diverse voices at all levels are critical to solving our complex fire challenges. It's not just the right thing to do—it's essential if we are to accomplish our mission. Fire is a wicked problem, and as Peter Williams noted in his post on the FAC Net blog, wicked problems require community collaboration and collaborative conservation. The more perspectives we include, the more likely we can get at the complexity of the challenges and at robust approaches to solving them.

PERFACT is still in the early stages of determining how to best address this critical need, but we've recently made progress identifying opportunities to make a difference. Our work in this area has heightened our awareness of the importance of diverse perspectives, inclusiveness in our teams and work environments, and equity in our outcomes.

PERFACT's work on diversity, equity and inclusion can be grouped into three categories:

- Supporting equitable community wildfire preparedness, response and recovery;
- Developing diverse and inclusive fire management workforces; and
- Supporting Native American communities that are revitalizing their traditional fire cultures in a contemporary context.

Maria Estrada, from The Nature Conservancy's Global Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) program, is assisting PERFACT in every facet of this work. In addition to working on the three main categories of work above, the team is providing network members and TREC participants with foundational training in key concepts. These trainings engage participants' hearts and minds, bring awareness about how our biases mediate our relationships in positive and negative ways, and challenge our beliefs and assumptions about people who are different from us. The trainings inspire participants to be mindful of power imbalances and work to shift power dynamics towards more equitable processes and outcomes. Many people report they are actively putting their training into practice.

“ Just inviting people into the room doesn't lead to equity. Each person needs to be included, their unique perspective valued.

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.

Supporting Equitable Community Wildfire Preparedness, Response and Recovery

Some segments of a community are disproportionately affected by disasters, including wildfire disasters. Take, for example, wildfire evacuation: economically disadvantaged residents may not own cars and so cannot readily evacuate; elderly residents may lack the mobility or resources to evacuate in a timely manner; and evacuation notifications in English (or poorly translated to other languages) might fail to provide life-saving information to residents whose first language is not English. Similar constraints affect people at all stages of the preparedness, response and recovery cycle—those without financial resources are less able to prepare for wildfires through home hardening and creating defensible space, and may not have sufficient renter's or homeowner's insurance to recover from losses.

Improved planning on the part of emergency management officials can help. But there is also much to do and learn when it comes to approaching so-called vulnerable and historically oppressed groups as viable and valued partners—ascertaining and elevating these groups' distinct perspectives, and bringing their strengths to bear to increase their resilience—and the community's—to wildfire.

Engaging Latinx communities in Washington

In January 2019, PERFACT helped connect staff from the Washington RC&D and Washington Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network with Sachamama, an organization that engages Latinx communities in respectful and responsive ways to learn about, and act on, climate threats. In July the groups secured funding and launched a pilot project that will increase Latinx community awareness about the social and ecological realities of wildfire in the state; grow a cadre of knowledgeable local Latinx leaders; and help the project partners learn how to partner equitably and develop practices that empower communities disproportionately impacted by the effects of wildland fire to act and advocate for themselves.



FAC Net hosted an “Engaging Across Difference” workshop in February 2019. Diversity and inclusion experts are helping network members develop essential skills for leveraging diversity to increase the effectiveness of their community wildfire adaptation efforts.

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Hosting difficult conversations in Austin, Texas

The Austin Fire Department's Wildfire Division, a FAC Net core member, is well-aware of the need for more equitable engagement of so-called vulnerable populations. Austin has been ranked repeatedly as one of the most economically segregated cities in the country. The Wildfire Division currently works with 15 Firewise USA® sites, all of which are on the relatively affluent west side of town. They are working to change this.

This spring Maria Estrada led a session about diversity, equity and inclusion at the Wildfire Division's annual Community Wildfire Symposium; other speakers discussed the city's history, demographic trends and socioeconomic realities. Written evaluations and verbal feedback were illuminating: one segment of participants didn't see the point of talking about socioeconomic disparities at a conference about wildfire mitigation, while another segment wondered why discussions about the risk on Austin's east side occurred only now that gentrification is beginning there. Organizers took this feedback as a sign that more of these conversations are needed. The Division is also working with the city Office of Sustainability and other partners on several related efforts, including a home wildfire risk assessment training for east side community advocates.

Engaging unhoused populations living on public lands

Campers who essentially live in national forests and on other public lands are both a wildfire threat, and an opportunity. On one hand, a significant number of wildfires are started by illegal camp fires, including theirs, but people living outdoors in fire-prone ecosystems are in a unique position to report fire starts early and otherwise aid first responders. FAC Net is hosting member discussions about a variety of topics related to working with these unhoused populations. To date, members from five communities in four states—Ashland, Bend, Durango, Santa Fe and Yakima—have begun comparing notes in monthly phone calls. Their hope is to find ways to engage with these community members in ways that will prevent wildfire starts, and improve overall fire safety and preparedness.

Developing a Diverse and Inclusive Workforce

Our team is also making strides influencing another type of community—the community of professional fire workers who are largely responsible for developing and implementing on-the-ground fire management strategies and tactics. The professional fire workforce today is largely white, male and agency-based. This has created a self-perpetuating culture that excels at rapid response—but is less effective than it could be at addressing emerging challenges. TNC is working to shift attitudes and create a more supportive environment for women and other under-represented groups.

Diversity, equity and inclusion concepts are fireline skills

Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges (TREX) draw scores of fire professionals each year who value the experiential training and exposure to a full range of the ecological, social, cultural and technical aspects of wildland fire. Some are relatively new to firefighting, while others are seasoned veterans. In 2017, we began incorporating DEI training—including discussions about gender, harassment and unconscious bias—in as many TREX events as possible. This year, two members of the TREX coaches network became “Active Bystander, Active Self” workshop facilitators so TREX can help more fire workers recognize and effectively address harassing, demeaning or discriminatory behavior.

We’ve engaged more than 300 TREX coaches and participants in DEI-related trainings, exposing them to key concepts and encouraging them to explore their hidden biases, be effective allies, and take other steps to make the fire management workforce a place where all types of people can thrive and contribute.

Building a network of women in fire

The first Women-in-Fire Training Exchange (WTREX) was held in 2016, after several women who took part in a TREX realized they could use it to engage participants of all genders in building a support network for female fire practitioners working to advance their leadership. The program has exceeded expectations in terms of interest (we can typically only accommodate about a quarter of applicants) as well as support from agencies and other partners, and interest among journalists, bloggers, movie producers—and participants.

To date, 117 people—about 85 percent women—have taken part in three WTREX. Planning is underway for the fourth WTREX, scheduled for 2020.



WTREX 2019

“ 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. 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.

“It is important that we do not make the mistakes of our past as we move into the future. Halting indigenous stewardship practices that have a symbiotic relationship in nature and replacing them with an economy-driven approach to land management is at the root of today’s ‘fire problem.’



Combining traditional ignition tools with NWCG-compliant safety gear reveals a unique way that the Yurok TRES enables participants to revitalize traditional fire culture in a contemporary context.

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MORE ONLINE

Peter Williams—wicked problems and collaboration
<https://fireadaptednetwork.org/whats-all-this-about-a-wicked-problem/>

Reflections on WTRES 2019
<https://fireadaptednetwork.org/reflections-from-the-women-in-fire-training-exchange/>

Indigenous Peoples Burning Network
<http://www.conservationgateway.org/ConservationPractices/FireLandscapes/Pages/IPBN.aspx>

Management Brief from the Karuk DNR
“Socio-Ecological First vs. Socio-Economic First”
http://www.karuk.us/images/docs/dnr/Socio%20Economic%20vs%20Socio%20Ecologic_Rossier_Tripp_2019.pdf

Supporting Native American Communities Revitalizing Traditional Fire Cultures

Indigenous peoples are increasingly being recognized for their ability to contribute to solutions to our mounting fire challenges. By providing a supportive framework, the Indigenous Peoples Burning Network (IPBN) is uniquely positioned to elevate tribal contributions in this shared journey.

Speaking up about indigenous fire solutions

Raising awareness is a key step in ensuring that Native American people will be respected contributors to bringing fire back into balance. With the help of IPBN leaders, the message is being heard—through blogs, videos, newspaper articles and social media—resulting in greater influence that will lead to more effective and equitable solutions.

Building fire management capacity

Broadening the way society shares ownership of fire means supporting tribally-led capacity-building on two fronts—perpetuating traditional burning for cultural reasons, and qualifying tribal members for jobs and partnerships in mainstream fire management.

Indigenous communities in Northern California traditionally conducted controlled burning along family lines. They used fire for stewardship of family-controlled gathering areas, as well as for wildlife habitat and village safety. This spring, the Cultural Fire Management Council coordinated six family-led burns and welcomed three new families into the program. Families also participated in pre-burn activities, including fire and safety training, site visits, preliminary burn unit planning and fireline preparation.

Other community members are obtaining NWCG qualifications through Yurok TRES events. Since 2014 these trainings have engaged more than 200 participants in treating nearly 500 acres. As a result of this burning, fire-dependent cultural resources have been renewed, and many local families are safer from wildfire, with defensible space around their homes.

All Hands

Our work in engaging diverse voices—and hands—in fire management is really just beginning. It will grow and evolve in ways we cannot yet see. But it will continue, since it is foundational to perhaps the most important strategy under PERFACT: expanding the ownership of, and responsibility for, fire management.

Because big, wicked problems require all hands.



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.

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