

# Scaling-up to Promote Ecosystem Resilience (SPER III)

## Scaling-up to Enable the Social and Operational Capacity for “Right Fire”

January 2015 – December 2017

The first VISTA Volunteer of the Bureau of Reclamation and Chama Peak Land Alliance provides outreach and education for forest and watershed resilience in the San Juan-Chama Headwaters. © CPLA



The SPER strategy began in 2011, with relatively modest amounts of funding strategically targeting implementation that yields larger-scale impacts: SPER projects have filled gaps or otherwise helped bring work in progress to a landscape scale. They have been catalysts, accelerating work in key places. In the first phase, six SPER I projects completed more than 20,000 acres of treatments in support of ecosystem resiliency, community safety and watershed protection. Under SPER II, five projects completed 3,000 acres of treatments, and local fire management capacity was increased through several training opportunities.

**SPER III is using a different strategy**, focusing on fewer places, more intensively. The goal is to accelerate the development of both the social and the operational capacity for using fire, benefitting forest resiliency and community wildfire protection alike. We think of this as getting to “right fire”—fire at the right time, right place and of the right size to move us toward our goal of living better with fire.

**The effort also addresses water security.** Resources are focused on landscapes where fire management actions will affect critical water sources for local communities or downstream users. SPER III projects are in places

where water security issues had been identified and where strategic and collaboratively-developed activities were already planned or underway, but can benefit from the additional input of funds, partnerships and expertise that SPER and the Fire Learning Network can provide.

**SPER III is supporting three tests** of getting to large-scale fire use. All three sites are cultivating the enabling conditions for success—developing the workforces, agreements and social license that will support the necessary work. Also key is getting fire on the ground in new ways—for example by setting the stage that allowed a broader range of partners to burn together, or building the relationships that allowed permits to be issued during a state-wide burn ban. Taken together, the multi-faceted SPER efforts are bringing these large landscapes closer to “right fire.”

**The three projects proposed** thinning and prescribed fire treatments on 965 acres over the three-year period. To date, at the half-way point, they have completed 669 acres of treatments (367 acres thinning, 302 acres of fire).



Burning at the Ashland Prescribed Fire Training Exchange © TNC

### California: Trinity Integrated Fire Management Partnership

Getting fire on the ground at Eagle Creek (as well as another, non-SPER, project) during the statewide burn ban was this project’s most significant accomplishment this spring. The burn at Eagle Creek was nearly two years in the making, so getting to implementation was a major success. Fire had been absent from the Eagle Creek site for over 100 years—and CAL FIRE had been unwilling to issue burn permits. But the emphasis on strengthening relationships with CAL FIRE bore fruit: it has significantly increased the capacity to work together through the permitting process—and has also allowed the use of CAL FIRE resources, and even burning together.

### New Mexico: Integrating Fire Adapted Communities, Resilient Landscapes and Response to Wildland Fire in the San Juan-Chama Headwaters of the Rio Grande Water Fund

SPER support here is bringing people together in local and regional gatherings that promote the use of fire and cross-jurisdictional planning for forest restoration and fire risk reduction—necessary groundwork in a multi-owner landscape. This team has organized learning sessions about prescribed fire liability and state laws for ranch managers in the targeted demonstration area, and helped them select and contract with qualified staff to write burn plans that meet national standards (that are higher than those required locally). This has day-lighted a business model for conducting prescribed burns that is more professionally anchored with more rigorous thresholds than previously practiced here. This is working in favor of the project goals—just a year ago attitudes of managers and owners were extremely risk averse, but through careful and deliberate exposure to the process of planning and coordinating burns, SPER has moved them to a more comfortable place. The managers of two ranches, for example, have moved from a position of not wanting to be the first ones to “experiment,” to being fully supportive of the current plan of work—which includes them deploying the first fire among their neighbors

### Oregon: Ashland Forest All-Lands Restoration Project

With SPER support, the ongoing Ashland Forest All-Lands Restoration (AFAR) project brought the first Prescribed Fire Training Exchange (TREN) to Ashland this spring. Like all TREN, it met numerous objectives, including capacity-building, increasing social license for fire and getting “good fire” (and smoke) on the ground

in priority places. About half of the 40 or so participants were from Oregon, but many had not previously worked together in inter-organizational crews; the formal training offered—and the demonstration that these mixed crews can be effective—both served to increase the capacity to use prescribed fire in the area. In addition to media outreach, the organizers arranged to have key stakeholders—a City Council member, Chamber of Commerce board member, OSU Extension Program Coordinator, Department of Environmental Quality representative and a local photographer—experience the burn by touring it during firing operations; providing these vivid personal experiences helps build important support among necessary allies. And, finally, the burns included treatments on land identified by the long-term collaborative group as strategic for watershed protection, with burn objectives developed using a recently-revised collaboratively developed set of Ashland Forest Resiliency prescribed burn objectives.



A City Councillor and Chamber of Commerce board member enjoy an up-close view of the Rogue River Siskiyou National Forest and Prescribed Fire Training Exchange (TREC) participants using fire.

© TNC (Darren Borgias)



This photo was taken while talking with the owner of the Eagle Creek Ranch, who was “super excited” to see the smoke rising, knowing that good fire was helping to restore the ecosystem she called home.

© WRTC (Dave Jaramillo)



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### What Makes a SPER Burn Special?

Not all acres are the same. When SPER projects focus on implementation of treatments, projects are selected to have important leverage—in terms of their landscape effects, other objectives that can be met (such as training for work-force development), value as demonstrations of what is possible, or all three. The California SPER lead discusses what made the Eagle Creek burn unit a good SPER burn:

The unit is adjacent to the Trinity River in the Upper Trinity River Watershed, and much of the water coming from this area is tied to the Central Valley water system through a series of water diversions. Several large meadows, not common in the county, are found within the project footprint, and more than 100 years of fire exclusion has led to a significant decrease in meadow habitat and function, increased fuel loads, and loss of oak woodland habitat. Several landowners share an interest in ecosystem restoration and making the area less susceptible to wildfire. All of these reasons combined made this location an ideal place to use SPER funding to get fire back onto the landscape.

Before our involvement, most of the project area had received very little attention for forest and watershed health, fuels reduction and habitat improvement. As a result, much of the area has heavy fuel loads and a tremendous amount of conifer encroachment—thousands of trees per acre—leading to the loss of meadow and oak woodland habitat.

We engaged our partners at the Trinity County RCD and the landowners to conduct site preparation—thinning and piling ponderosa pine encroaching along the meadow edges and under power lines, pruning some trees that we knew would burn in a prescribed fire, clearing blackberry, and scratching a hand line. Many of the piles were burned by the landowners before our understory burn. Complications of burning in this area include the proximity to a highway (a major scenic corridor) and homes (including historic structures). One of the landowners runs a quaint destination resort and was fearful of smoke and visual impacts on guests. High fuel loads, species composition shifts, and social license all added to the complexity of getting fire back onto this landscape. We burned. Fire effects were great. We had good consumption and we met the objectives of introducing fire back into the landscape, reducing fuels, killing young conifers, and limiting mortality to overstory trees. It was a very limited burn window—we knew that the high end of the prescription would get pushed at some point the day of the burn. In fact, we stopped ignitions and let the fire back down the hill (due to the low fine dead fuel moisture) during the hottest portion of the day. Although we only burned a portion of the planning area, all of the landowners were pleased with the outcomes of the fire. One who was out of the country during the burn, called when he got back and expressed his satisfaction with the work.