

Southern Blue Ridge Fire Learning Network Continues to Mature, Evolve and Innovate

When the SBR FLN collaboration began 14 years ago, partners focused on bringing fire back to the mountains. In 2007, partner agencies recognized that we were treating a drop in the bucket compared to how much fire-adapted vegetation we have on our landscape. We knew we needed to increase the scale of our treatments—and that to do so, we needed to work together more, and better. In 2019 we're doing this. Partners now regularly work across boundaries: It's not uncommon for three or more agencies to work side by side on a prescribed burn. Multi-agency burn units are no longer a one-off event.

SBR FLN members now regularly report expanded acreage treated, as well as various "firsts": a new partner, a new landscape, an agency's first helicopter ignitions, a TREX. We remain aggressive about increasing acreage but now our thinking is much more nuanced. We consider seasonality and other factors that influence fire effects.

Our goals have also changed. From our original goal of "restoring fire-adapted systems," we have broadened our lens, and now seek to "build resilient fire-adapted ecosystems and help human communities to live with fire."

All of these topics percolated through the discussions at our 14th annual workshop in May.

Building on Success, Looking Ahead

Our annual workshops provide a chance to look at our collective work and assess its successes, as well as any shortcomings. In



The research of Steve Norman (USFS Southern Research Station) indicates that large fires, such as those that occurred in autumn of 2016 in the southern Appalachian Mountains, have occurred in the historical record, but may be more common in our future.

Photo: USFS (Steve Bekkerus)

2019, we have recognized that to reach our restoration goals, we must expand our burn windows. Growing season fire is part of the historical record in our landscapes. Dendrochronology shows that fires burned during the lightning season as well as during the dormant season (when most prescribed fire is now applied), indicating that both humans and lightning have played a role in promoting fire-adapted vegetation over time. At this year's workshop, we came away with a consensus that summer burns are key to stimulate flowering in forbs and can be an effective tool controlling hardwoods (with or without other treatments). We concluded they should be considered where we want to expand our burn season and where goals include promoting more a diverse prairie, woodland or forest structure for plants and animals.

TREX: Supporting Capacity-Building for Robust Collaborative Fire Management

Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges (TREX) bring people from a wide range of organizations, locations and backgrounds together to build their wildland fire skills and qualifications while conducting burns in support of local objectives.



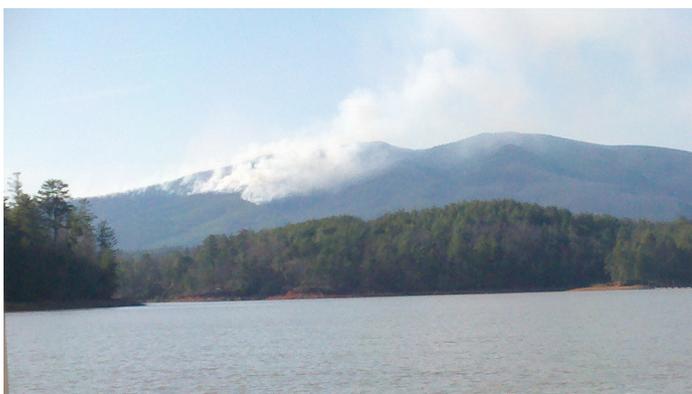
In the fall of 2018, the Southern Blue Ridge FLN and the Consortium of Appalachian Fire Managers and Scientists co-hosted the first TREX in the SBR region. The 65 participants in that event gained burning experience, with 154 formal NWCG training assignments completed, and the TREX

provided numerous excellent opportunities for community engagement through both traditional and social media channels.

The success of the 2018 TREX inspired the SBR FLN to host another this coming fall.

Southern Blue Ridge TREX
October 26-November 6, 2020
Pickens, SC

Details will be posted on the Upcoming TREX page of the Conservation Gateway in May 2020.



Prescribed fires within Lake James State Park in North Carolina may help protect water supplies by killing proportionately more mesic trees, which require more water than the less-thirsty fire-adapted oaks and pines that historically dominated the slopes. The North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, North Carolina State Parks and U.S. Forest Service worked together to burn this unit. Thanks to the robust partnerships fostered by the FLN, multi-agency burns like this are becoming commonplace in the southern Appalachians.

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Fire and Water

This year, we've also increasingly discussed the relationship between forests and human communities as weather events continue to affect our burn seasons in ways we have never experienced. There is considerable interest in better understanding the interplay between forests and water resources for biodiversity and people. We have begun to explore how canopy composition influences water availability—for the forest, and for the cities that rely on them for adequate water supplies. Both prescribed fire and wildfire can alter the type and number of trees on our slopes. We are working with researchers to track the long-term effects of widespread and high-severity wildfires, even as we prepare ourselves for a repeat of our 2016 fire season, which was unprecedented, at least in our lifetimes.

The next regional workshop of the Southern Blue Ridge FLN is scheduled for May 19-21, 2020 in Dillard, Georgia.

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Or visit <http://www.sbrfln.com/>

Participant Organizations

American Conservation Experience
Appalachian RC&D FAC Coalition
Blue Ridge RC&D Council
Carlson Forestry
Clemson University
Consortium of Appalachian Fire Managers & Scientists (CAFMS)
Forest Stewards Guild
Fork Ridge Environmental Consulting
Georgia Department of Natural Resources
Greenville Water
Moss Forestry Consulting Services, Inc.
MountainTrue
National Park Service
National Science Foundation—National Ecological Observatory Network (NEON)
National Weather Service
National Wild Turkey Federation
North Carolina Forest Service
North Carolina Natural Heritage Program
North Carolina Plant Conservation Program
North Carolina State Parks
North Carolina State University
North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission
Ranger Ecosystem Restoration
Shortleaf Pine Initiative
South Carolina Department of Natural Resources
South Carolina Forestry Commission
South Carolina State Park Service
Southeast Cohesive Wildland Fire Strategy
Southwestern North Carolina RC&D Council
Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation
Tennessee Division of Forestry
Tennessee State Parks
Tennessee Tech University
Tennessee Valley Authority
Tennessee Wildlife Resources Commission
Texas A&M University
The Nature Conservancy—Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia chapters
University of Missouri
University of Tennessee
University of the South
USDA Forest Service—Chattahoochee-Oconee, Cherokee, Francis Marion & Sumter, and Nantahala-Pisgah National Forests
USDA Forest Service—R8 Regional Office
USDA Forest Service—Southern Research Station
USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
Western Carolina University
Wildwood Consulting PLLC

The Fire Learning Network is part of *Promoting Ecosystem Resilience and Fire Adapted Communities Together*, a cooperative agreement between The Nature Conservancy, USDA Forest Service and agencies of the Department of the Interior. For more information about PERFACT, contact Marek Smith at marek_smith@tnc.org.

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