

Learning from the Plumas County Cal-TREX

October 24-November 22, 2020
Plumas County, California

Lessons from Hosting a Locally Focused Short-Duration TREX

By Erin Banwell

Co-Director of Fire Management, The Watershed Research and Training Center
TREX Coach; California Klamath-Siskiyou FLN Co-Lead

In October and November of 2020, several partners hosted the Plumas County Cal-TREX, based in Quincy, California. The event's goals were to:

- use prescribed fire to restore forest health,
- reduce hazardous fuels around communities,
- train local prescribed fire leaders in Incident Management Team roles using the Incident Command System, and
- provide access to training and skills development for local residents and professionals.

The TREX model provided a framework for planning, cooperation and shared liability. The challenges of 2020 required modifications to the standard TREX model of a two-week event with a geographically diverse set of participants. Highlights from those modifications are collected here so that others can learn from and build on an event that successfully navigated a difficult prescribed fire season and brought value to the local workforce and community.

Shifting to a Local, Short-Duration Model

Inspired by the planning efforts of the North Bay Cal-TREX 2020 led by TREX Coach Sasha Berleman, the Plumas County Cal-TREX was held over five consecutive weekends from mid-October through mid-November. Participants were asked to commit to three of the five weekends to ensure stability, training progression, and an adequate workforce for burning.

Squad Organization

The Incident Management Team built the Assignment List (ICS-204) with the TREX mindset of creating diverse squads based on fireline experience, backgrounds, medical qualifications, and organizational representation. The team also took weekend availability into account. Instead of making a new ICS-204 each weekend, the squads were locked in for the duration of the event, despite the fluctuation of individual attendance. This offered each squad stability, flexibility and a high level of accountability. If needed, participants could seamlessly alter their originally committed dates, and were

always welcome to join their squad on any given weekend. The workload of creating a single ICS-204 for the five-part event was likened to a giant sudoku puzzle, but worked out great during the event. The team also found it was important to have secondary squad bosses in the event that the primary squad boss had to miss a weekend.

Self-Sufficiency

Self-sufficiency was part of the COVID-19 mitigations, and also cut down on costs and logistical needs; it was feasible because participants gathered for only two days at a time. Participants were expected to be self-sufficient for a period of 48 hours. For lodging, half of the participants lived within driving distance, and could commute daily; camping sites were made available to all participants. Meals were not provided. The team provided a porta-potty and a handwashing station for the campers. The event typically ended Sunday by 1600 to allow for adequate travel time home.

All equipment, personal protective equipment, and camping fees were borrowed, donated or waived, and the event was free for all participants. Not including personnel time, costs for this event were less than \$800 for supplies and logistics.



A socially distanced operational briefing kicked off a prescribed burn exercise where participants simulated firing and holding operations on a unit at Feather River College. © Erin Banwell / WRTC

Opportunities

Development of a Community Prescribed Fire Workforce

The weekends-only structure of this TRES allowed local community members who wouldn't be able to attend a typical 14-day TRES to participate. The Plumas County event drew a mix of students, volunteer firefighters, land managers, federal partners, and community members—including private landowners, small business owners and a dentist. These kinds of participants are key to building local prescribed fire capacity and prescribed burn association development. This event showcased a model of rapid mobilization and demobilization of a large, locally based workforce each weekend.

Local Leaders of Prescribed Fire

This event would not have been successful without the multitude of dedicated prescribed fire leaders in the Plumas County community. There is an established prescribed burn association, the Plumas Underburn Cooperative; the local volunteer fire departments are excited and eager to participate in prescribed fire; several non-profit organizations have employees in leadership positions that are committed to planning and implementing prescribed fires; and there are a handful of local USFS employees who are dedicated and passionate about training a local workforce.



A fire practitioner keeps their "eyes in the green" during a mock burn scenario. Participants of the Plumas County Cal-TRES wore masks throughout the event, even when physically distanced.

© Erin Banwell / WRTC

Due to the workload and complexities of hosting a TRES, using the Incident Command System and forming a Type 3 Incident Management Team was essential. With mentorship from TRES coaches Miller Bailey (who served as Deputy Incident Commander) and Erin Banwell (Plans Section Chief), local leaders seized the opportunity to learn the roles and responsibilities of Incident Management Team positions (Incident Commander, Public Information Officer, Tribal Liaison, Operations Section Chief for Private Lands, Logistics Section Chief, and Fire Effects Monitor), despite not having the traditional qualifications. Plumas National Forest staff filled the roles of Operations Section Chief for federal lands, Situation Unit Leader, Communications Unit Leader and Agency Administrator Representative. This locally based Incident Management Team is now fully functioning and able to distribute the workload of planning further TRES events using the Incident Command System.

Outside-the-Box Trainings

This TRES, planned for five weekends, in the end consisted of three training weekends and one pile burning weekend (burning on both federal and private lands); one weekend was canceled due to weather.

Regardless of burn window opportunities, the first weekend was committed to training and team building activities. After that, the team watched for weekend burn windows, which finally opened on Weekend 5 of the event. In the intervening weeks, the team was creative, thinking outside the box to provide meaningful training opportunities. These included:

- a modified, field-based NWCG S-219 Firing Operations course;
- mock fire training scenarios in one of the planned burn units, conducted with engine and UTV pumps running, ignitors walking with drip torches through the unit, pre-flagged wind shifts and spot fires, and very enthusiastic facilitators;
- rotations through training stations focused on leadership, weather, communications, medical events, firing, engine familiarization, pumps and water handling, cultural burning discussion, and key messages and mock interviews;
- flash presentations from participants;
- a diversity, equity and inclusion discussion focused on the use of language;

-
- prep work on burn units;
 - Avenza mapping exercises; and
 - field trips to completed fuels reduction projects and wildfire areas.

Challenges

COVID-19

The Incident Management Team did not take lightly the responsibility of hosting an in-person training event with 46 participants during a global pandemic, and was committed to providing a safe working environment for all participants. The team came up with strict COVID-19 protocols, which included the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) COVID-19 daily self-screening checklist. The team also kept local health department officials up to date with planning efforts, and used a COVID risk level dashboard to evaluate the county's risk before to each weekend event.

During planning, the Incident Management Team assumed everyone would be masked during briefings and other obvious times when physical distancing standards would not be met, but that participants would otherwise be allowed to work maskless. When everyone started working in the field, however, it was immediately noticed that the dynamic nature of fire and the training environment resulted in frequent and unplanned breaks in physical distancing standards. Without pushback from the participants, everyone adapted to a 100% mask policy.

The team also implemented the "COVID Cowbell." The Safety Officer carried a cowbell throughout the day. Whenever the cowbell rang (sometimes over the radio), everyone would pause and take a "60 seconds for sanitation" break. This was also a good reminder that while operating with COVID-19 protocols, operations will not be as fast or efficient as we are used to. We found that frequent COVID-19 reminders—during briefings, in squad breakouts, when filling up drip torches, during AARs, etc.—were useful (and even necessary), because it is easy to fall back into normal operations.

As we approached our last weekend, COVID-19 cases were on the rise throughout California. The Incident Management Team evaluated the county risk levels map, and made the decision to only allow residents of Plumas County and those immediately-adjacent to participate. A handful of participants lived a few counties away in counties at the "Active or



Participants practiced containing a "spot fire" during a training exercise in Meadow Valley, California. © Erin Banwell / WRTC

Imminent Outbreak" risk level; the team asked those participants not to attend the last weekend.

Another Historic Wildfire Season

Plumas County had several large wildfires burning throughout the summer. The Incident Management Team's federal partners were dealing with wildfires spread across the Plumas National Forest, including the 319,000-acre North Complex, which burned 70% of the Feather River Ranger District. While planning for the event, some Incident Management Team members were under evacuation warnings and orders and dealing with power outages as the North Complex burned through the rural wildland urban interfaces of Plumas County. In spite of these challenges—and the risk that either COVID or lingering effects from the wildfire season would force cancellation of the event—the team persisted, knowing that if they did have to cancel this fall, all of the planning would still pay off for a future event.

Lack of Middle Management

One challenge in hosting a strictly local TRES event is the inability to tap into a national (indeed, international) network to build a robust and experienced team of fire practitioners. In this case, the TRES lacked experienced middle management fire practitioners, so the field training and leadership fell on a small handful of people. When planning a locally based event, it is beneficial to lean on qualified federal partner participation to fill middle management leadership roles.

PLANNING PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

California State University, Chico—Big Chico Creek Ecological Reserve
Feather River Resource Conservation District
Les Hall (Mountain Maidu Tribe, Meadow Valley Fire Department)
Plumas County Fire Safe Council
Plumas Underburn Cooperative
The Nature Conservancy
The Watershed Research and Training Center
University of California Cooperative Extension
USDA Forest Service—Plumas National Forest

Prioritizing Position Taskbooks and Evaluations

This event was focused on building local capacity for non-traditional prescribed fire practitioners, most of whom do not have a certifying agency for hosting red cards. This should not keep these fire practitioners from working through FFT1 and FEMO taskbooks during an event—these position taskbooks are a great framework for building and tracking leadership and advanced firefighter tasks, even without a goal of certification.

The short duration weekend model made it challenging to find time to evaluate position taskbooks. Including a Training Officer on the Incident Management Team will help facilitate training opportunities, and a well thought out plan for when and by whom position taskbook evaluations will be completed is important. For the Plumas TRES, evaluators were able to use some squad rehabilitation time to complete one or two position taskbooks a day during the later weekends of the event.

Looking to the Future

The burning on the last weekend was not the end of the Plumas County Cal-TRES. In early December, partners in Butte County had a burn window, and participants from the TRES mobilized to help with the burn. It was encouraging to see support across county lines continue beyond the TRES event—an early success in the goal of building local capacity.

MORE ONLINE

Plumas County Cal-TRES Assignment List (ICS-204)
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1eKVfdTUDuZXPXvoQmKnuZlcvksKuR2v-/view>

Plumas Underburn Cooperative
<https://calpba.org/plumas-underburn-cooperative>

COVID-19 protocols for Plumas TRES
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1bX-4eXS4LhUNumTzewYKHBuc4bbh8niv/view>

CDC COVID-19 screening checklist
<https://www.cdc.gov/screening/paper-version.pdf>

COVID Risk Levels Dashboard
<https://globalepidemics.org/key-metrics-for-covid-suppression/>

The Incident Management Team also began planning a spring 2021 event almost immediately. Looking further ahead, the team wants to host a three-day training weekend every burn season, and then keep a roster of local participants on-call to take advantage of burn window opportunities as they arise.

Looking back, the Incident Management Team had plenty of reasons to cancel the TRES: COVID-19, public perceptions after a difficult wildfire season, changes in workload to accommodate post-wildfire recovery, stress—and the uncertainty that the event could go forward after all. The implementation of prescribed fire is no small feat. When planning for prescribed fires, there are always a million reasons to cancel. But working through these challenges is worth the benefits of getting good fire back on the landscape. So the team held public meetings and planning meetings, met with landowners, and developed burn plans. Despite the challenges, they successfully delivered a high-quality training to 46 local prescribed fire practitioners. They got some fire on the ground. And together they set the area up for further success.

For more about Cal-TRES contact:

Erin Banwell (928) 707-9574
firemanagement@thewatershedcenter.com

This Cal-TRES was supported by the USDA Forest Service Pacific Southwest Region. Cal-TRES are adapted from the Prescribed Fire Training Exchange (TRES) model developed under the *Promoting Ecosystem Resilience and Fire Adapted Communities Together* (PERFACT) 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.

An equal opportunity provider