

By Kody Wohlers, Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation

Sponsored by the Loess Hills Fire Partners, this event provided an opportunity to join with partners to achieve fire management in an area where additional skills and resources are needed to accomplish work at a landscape scale. It was also an opportunity to build relationships with partners, share knowledge and skills, and work within a more complex organizational structure than usual, using the Incident Command System.

In our landscape and organizations, the squad boss level (FFT1) continues to be the most crucial and critical for fire operations. Firefighters at this level possess the local knowledge that aids in their ability to control both the holding and firing within their divisions, while also controlling the tempo for the day. Focusing additional time, knowledge and experience towards this position level is a necessity for all organizations within the Loess Hills to continue to build fire capacity, proficiency, and efficiency.



Broken Kettle Corral unit test fire, April 28

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PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Briar Cliff University
Bureau of Land Management
Cherokee County Conservation Board
Conservation Corps of Minnesota & Iowa
Conservation Districts of Iowa
Fontenelle Forest
Golden Hills RC&D
Hardin County Conservation Board
Harrison County Conservation Board
Ida County Conservation Board
Iowa Department of Natural Resources
Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation
Iowa State University
Kansas Forest Service
Lewis Township Fire & Rescue
Minnesota GreenCorps
Monona County Conservation Board
Oregon Woods
Programa Amazonía Sin Fuego (Ecuador)
Pheasants Forever
Plymouth County Conservation Board
Pottawattamie County Conservation Board
Private landowners
Salix Volunteer Fire Department
Sioux City Fire & Rescue
The Nature Conservancy
Turkey Creek Preserve
USDA Forest Service
Whiting Volunteer Fire Department
Wohlers Fire Equipment LLC
Woodbury County Conservation Board

This year's Cooperative Burn Week was based at the Broken Kettle Grassland Preserve headquarters, about 15 miles north of Sioux City. The event focused on the northern Hills, in Monona, Woodbury and Plymouth counties. Burn units at the Broken Kettle Grassland Preserve, Plymouth County

Conservation lands, Iowa DNR wildlife management areas and Woodbury County Conservation lands were identified as priority areas. Each of our five operational periods presented opportunities to simultaneously burn multiple units at four different locations.

Managing for the Pandemic

While the 2020 Cooperative Burn Week was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, partners were able to hold the event in 2021 by implementing strict policies and protocols for all participating personnel. All participants were required to maintain six feet of spacing and to wear masks whenever in close proximity, in vehicles or inside any facilities.

Participants were regularly encouraged to wash hands and sanitize commonly used surfaces to promote proper hygiene. We tried to maintain divisions working together throughout the week with minimal shuffling of personnel. Our morning operational briefings were broadcast by radio each shift to maintain our COVID-19 protocols and keep personnel spread out. All meals were prepackaged and separated, or individually served by the caterer. Throughout the event, no participants showed any signs or symptoms of the COVID-19 virus.



Interior ignition burns out on the Heendah Hills Pond unit, April 29.
© TNC (Emily Hohman)



The crew ties off the unit on the Hargroves North CRP. © Lance Brisbois

Robust Burn Organization to Support Training

A total of 109 people from 48 agencies and organizations, volunteer fire departments and other volunteers participated in the Cooperative Burn Week. On any given day, we had from 49 to 69 personnel taking part, which allowed for pairing of mentors and trainees to facilitate a one-on-one working and learning environment.

There was a diverse variety of training opportunities throughout the week. Eleven individuals received evaluations for their FFT1 (squad boss) taskbooks, one on their FIRB taskbook, and one on their RxB2 taskbook; several people also served as agency burn boss trainees. Numerous trainees were able to work in their respective trainee role during more than one operational shift. Other training opportunities included learning new or different engine and UTV setups, portable pump set-up, firing and holding techniques, smoke management tactics, terrain influence on fire behavior, live fire size-up and initial attack exercises, tactical engine exercises, and working within a complex burn organization with multiple divisions organized under the Incident Command System. Nineteen personnel from multiple agencies served on the Incident Management Team in a variety of roles. Several members served in trainee or learning roles on the team to gain experience and build redundancy in the region.



A crew performs their (socially distanced) after action review at the end of an operational shift to continue facilitating training and operational improvement on the fireline.
© Thad Pothast



Scott Moats of The Nature Conservancy addresses Guest Day attendees.

© Geoffrey Fischer

Burn Unit Summary: 5 Days — 21 Burn Units — 1,792.6 Acres

UNIT	LANDOWNER	COUNTY	DATE	UNIT ACRES	DAY ACRES
Hillview-Newburg Pasture	Plymouth CCB	Plymouth	April 26	52	
Oak Ridge-3 Christman N	Woodbury CCB	Woodbury	April 26	87	
Stone SP-Mt. Talbot East	DNR (Stone SP)	Plymouth	April 26	14	
Stangeldorf	DNR (MO River)	Monona	April 26	79	
Deer Creek Hoffman East	DNR (MO River)	Plymouth	April 26	26	
Deer Creek Hoffman West	DNR (MO River)	Plymouth	April 26	67	325
Hargroves North CRP	DNR (MO River)	Monona	April 27	77	
Boyd's Bend	Plymouth CCB	Plymouth	April 27	120	
Oak Ridge-1 NE Deer Run	Woodbury CCB	Woodbury	April 27	150	347
5-Ridge-Rock Creek	Plymouth CCB	Plymouth	April 28	183	
BKG-Corral Unit	TNC	Plymouth	April 28	12	
Deer Creek Peterson/Rapaich	DNR (MO River)	Plymouth	April 28	238	433
Broken Kettle-Little Lopez	TNC	Plymouth	April 29	18	
Broken Kettle-Big Lopez	TNC	Plymouth	April 29	38	
Heendah Hills Pond	DNR (MO River)	Plymouth	April 29	39	
5-Ridge-Rock Creek Interior	Plymouth CCB	Plymouth	April 29	relight	
Southwood-Hammond Timber	Woodbury CCB	Woodbury	April 29	78.5	173.5
Table Marsh-Dudycha	DNR (MO River)	Woodbury	April 30	483	
Kohlbaum Easement (partial)	Woodbury CCB	Woodbury	April 30	15.6	
Broken Kettle-Visitors' Center	TNC	Plymouth	April 30	0.5	
Welsh Prairie	private landowner	Crawford	April 30	14	
King Cemetery	township trustees	Crawford	April 30	1	514.1

Public Outreach With Live Fire

We also hosted a Guest Day that 19 guests attended to learn more about the stewardship in the region, the Loess Hills Fire Partners, and the partnering, planning and coordination entailed in the Cooperative Burn Week. Guests were able to see two separate firing operations on their tour, as well as interact with firefighters on the fireline from a safe location. Among the guests were legislators, agency administrators, organizational donors and supporters, event funding supporters and media. The public information officers and other key staff for the event also promoted and moderated coverage of the event on several social media platforms, enhancing the message of the importance of prescribed fire and collaborative partnerships.

Success on Several Fronts

Participants have shared that the Cooperative Burn Week was a positive experience and was successful in achieving multiple objectives, including land management goals, fireline training and experience, leadership and personal development skills, and improving collaboration between partners in the Loess Hills region. The participation of 109 people, most of whom came from within the Loess Hills, speaks to the high level of interest among partners in collaboratively completing priority burn units and pursuing training and networking opportunities in the region.

The attendance of individuals from three countries, ten states, and 16 counties in Iowa provided a strong benefit to our overall effort. Several organizations from across the



The Table Marsh-Dudycha unit capped off a great week of cooperative burning, training and ecological restoration in the Loess Hills.

© Kody Wohlers

state sent personnel to gain fireline knowledge, learn from a professional atmosphere and gain tips towards starting other cooperative efforts across the state. The use of an expanded Incident Management Team as well as a more focused Incident Command System provided additional organization and smoother operations on burn days, during transitional periods, and throughout the week in its entirety. A more detailed after action review of the event will be conducted at the next Loess Hills Fire Partners quarterly meeting.

Supporting Cooperative Burn Week

Funding for this event was provided by The Fire Learning Network, the Loess Hills Alliance and participating agencies. These funders provided financial support for supplies, morning and evening meals, housing, and planning meeting support. Additional project support was provided by the participants and their agencies in the form of personnel and equipment time. Other participants donated their personal time and labor to support this event during unit prep, planning, and burn operations. The Nature Conservancy at Broken Kettle Grassland generously donated meeting and logistical space for the week, while the Woodbury County Conservation Board, Plymouth County Conservation Board, Stone State Park and The Nature Conservancy provided lodging and camping space at their facilities.

MORE ONLINE

KTIV, "Loess Hills Fire Partners Host 5th Annual Cooperative Burn Week"

<https://ktiv.com/2021/04/29/loess-hills-fire-partners-host-5th-annual-cooperative-burn-week/>

Sioux City Journal, "More Than 100 Firefighters Gather in Loess Hills to Burn Grasslands"

https://siouxcityjournal.com/news/local/more-than-100-firefighters-gather-in-loess-hills-to-burn-grasslands/article_2e49efcd-46e7-521e-b9e1-cec2e793b686.html

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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 PERFECT, contact Marek Smith at marek_smith@tnc.org.

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