



Fire Learning Network Notes from the Field

Loess Hills Prescribed Fire Training Exchange

April 2013

In the Loess Hills of western Iowa, land managers, farmers and municipal fire departments are working together to improve the prairies and pastures for forage, wildlife habitat and scenic beauty. Fire-fighters from federal, state, county, private and municipal departments from six states—Iowa, Kansas, Ohio, Utah, Wisconsin and Wyoming—arrived in the first week of April to exchange knowledge and experience while completing numerous controlled burns. The crews, made up of both seasoned fire professionals and new recruits,

are working with land managers in the Loess Hills to practice and improve their prescribed fire skills while also providing a much needed benefit to the land. “What a great learning opportunity,” said Bob Buhr of the Bureau of Land Management in Wyoming.

Kyle Lapham, the FLN landscape leader and Loess Hills Fire Coordinator for The Nature Conservancy, noted that “Iowa is a prairie state, but only a tenth of one percent of Iowa’s native prairies remain, and the largest intact tracts are here in the Loess Hills. Fire has long

played an important role in the prairies and forests of North America, so if we want to protect our water and soils, we need to keep good fire on the landscape.” The controlled burns that do that job are planned weeks and sometimes months in advance; burn plans are written by the land owner and burns are conducted only when the weather is just right.

This training started with the participants spending half a day in the classroom learning about local ecology and burn planning, and working with a local meteorologist to understand the weather patterns and forecasts for the area. Participants then went out and burned 33 acres at Farm Creek Public Wildlife Area near Carson, Iowa.

After a week of good fire weather, rain and snow moved in, but the training exchange kept going strong. “There are lots of folks here who are eager to do fire. When the weather isn’t favorable for burning, we still have days full of activities.” said Kyle Lapham, The Nature Conservancy’s Loess Hills Fire Coordinator. “We scout, plan, and prep units so we don’t waste a minute when we get good fire weather.”

In addition to those activities, fire-fighters have valuable time to learn from each other’s experience and knowledge, whether fire related or not. As Michele Witecha of the



Pre-burn planning and briefings are essential to the safe and effective use of prescribed fire.

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A crew backfires a line at the Sylvan Runkel State Preserve.

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A resource planner with Pottawattamie County makes sure the fire stays where it belongs.

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Firefighters worked into the early evening to make sure Farm Creek was secure before heading back to camp.

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Kansas Forest service put it, "It's almost like a conference environment. We're taking advantage of pooled knowledge from all over the country. I'm learning so much from presentations by participants about different regions and programs. There's also a lot of giving and receiving input and advice about challenges people are facing in their day-to-day jobs."

Other activities included a very realistic fire scenario exercise, presentations from county, municipal, state, federal, and private partners, safety discussions and equipment training.

Over the course of two weeks, the 35 firefighters participating in this exchange applied much-needed fire to about 200 acres on state and county lands, and completed black-lining and other preparations on an 850-acre unit that local crews will now be able to treat in the near future.



Participants practiced simulating the sequence of lighting and holding using scenario-based exercises with maps and weather and fire behavior descriptions. To add to the realism, participants were physically separated during the exercise, requiring all instructions, commands and actions to be communicated by radio.

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The Fire Learning Network is supported by *Promoting Ecosystem Resiliency through Collaboration: Landscapes, Learning and Restoration*, a cooperative agreement between The Nature Conservancy, USDA Forest Service and agencies of the Department of the Interior. For more information about the FLN, contact Lynn Decker at ldecker@tnc.org or (801) 320-0524.



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While a burn boss trainee from the Kansas Forest Service discusses tactics with squad leaders before burning at Sylvan Runkel State Preserve, a burn boss trainee from the BLM is interviewed by Iowa Public Television in the background.

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Top: A wildlife biologist from the Iowa Department of Natural Resources discusses fire preparations with a local resident.

Bottom: Firefighters burn out around a scenic gazebo as they prepare a burn unit for an upcoming prescribed fire. © Amy Crouch/TNC

Participating Agencies & Organizations

- Agren Inc.
- Bureau of Land Management—High Plains District
- Council Bluffs Fire Department
- Harrison County Conservation Board
- Iowa Department of Natural Resources—Forestry, Wildlife
- Kansas Prescribed Fire Council
- Kansas State Forest Service
- Loess Hills Alliance
- Loess Hills Preservation Society
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
- Plymouth County Conservation Board
- Pottawattamie County Conservation Board
- Private landowners
- Standing Cedars Community Land Conservancy
- The Nature Conservancy—Iowa, Ohio
- USDA Forest Service

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