



Fire Learning Network Notes from the Field

Southern Blue Ridge FLN Annual Workshop

Johnson City, TN
May 17-19, 2016

More than 85 people took part in the SBR FLN's eleventh regional workshop, which centered on collaborative restoration of fire-adapted ecosystems throughout the Southern Blue Ridge. Participants enjoyed meeting with a wide range of colleagues from three federal agencies; forestry, parks and wildlife agencies from five states; three land trusts; four universities; five state chapters of The Nature Conservancy; the Consortium of Appalachian Fire Managers and Scientists; and the Central Appalachian FLN.

The first day began with an orientation to the host landscape—the Unaka/Great Smoky Mountains—and a spotlight on the work being done there. That work includes the Cherokee National Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative (a 13-member collaborative) and the Ecomath burn prioritization modeling effort. The morning also highlighted the great burn year in the Southern Blue Ridge, which saw more than 49,000 acres of prescribed burns and 12,000 acres of wildfires, with no homes lost.

Two break-out panel discussion sessions in the afternoon addressed monitoring and scaling up capacity.

Key insights from the panel sessions included:

- Keep collecting monitoring data—it is valuable. Integrate monitoring projects across the region to increase the power of findings.
- We are making an impact, but it can be difficult to measure due to so many variables at play.
- Scaling up doesn't always require more money—maximizing efficiencies and partnerships works.
- Adding capacity to partner burns through on-call and contract crew modules was effective this year.

The second day held a field visit to the Cherokee National Forest. Integrated fire and silvicultural treatment areas, shortleaf pine restoration locations, and early successional habitat creation provided the backdrops and fodder for lots of excellent discussion.

A lot of ground was covered by the presentations and discussions on the final day. They began with presentations from the National Park Service and Forest Service about smoke and smoke management. Next up was a session on community engagement that

Participant Organizations

Chestatee-Chattahoochee RC&D
Clemson University
Consortium of Appalachian Fire Managers and Scientists
Duke University
Georgia Department of Natural Resources
Georgia ForestWatch
Georgia State Parks
Greenville Water
Mainspring Conservation Trust
MountainTrue
National Park Service
National Wild Turkey Federation
North Carolina Forest Service
North Carolina State Parks
North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission
Shortleaf Pine Initiative
South Carolina Department of Natural Resources
South Carolina State Park Service
Tennessee Division of Forestry
Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency
Texas A&M University
The Nature Conservancy
US Forest Service
Virginia Natural Heritage Program
Virginia Tech
Western Carolina University Forest Stewards



Highlight: Adaptive Management Panel

Panelists:

Bob Lewis, Cherokee National Forest (SBR FLN)

Dr. Peter Bates, Forest Stewards, Inc. (SBR FLN)

Rob Klein, Great Smoky Mountains National Park (SBR FLN)

Jean Lorber, The Nature Conservancy—Virginia Chapter (Central Appalachians FLN)

Looking at the network's adaptive management process was the topic of one of the two breakout sessions on the first afternoon of the workshop. The goal of the session was to determine whether our monitoring efforts are accurately capturing the impacts of our management, and make recommendations for changes that might be needed.

FLN partners recognized early on that adaptive management is key to bringing fire back to the Appalachian Mountains.

Fire has been excluded from these landscapes for many decades or even longer. Most land management agencies' burn programs are in their infancy, as prescribed fire has been used more extensively across the landscape only for the last 20 years or so. Today's managers have many questions about appropriate fire intensity, seasonality and return intervals, and general effects on vegetation and fuels. Observing and understanding the changes that occur after fire's reintroduction is a key component to defining what we want the future to look like and how to get there. We describe what we want our woods to look like, apply fire, track changes, and determine whether we are heading in the right direction. If we are not, we adjust what we do, or what we expect. Fire effects monitoring is a crucial part of the reintroduction of fire to the Appalachians.

SBR FLN partners collect similar data on vegetation and fuels in permanent plots. We then disseminate plot information to create a larger pool of data, and a stronger analysis, which we discuss amongst each other as well as with our sister network, the Central Appalachians FLN.

Dr. Bates said it well: "The world is driven by accountability. We need to assess whether prescribed burning is achieving management goals, and inform adaptive management strategies" with the data we collect.

However, agencies struggle with this endeavor. All panelists noted that sometimes units don't get burned on schedule because of weather or other issues. Keeping track

of plots and data is a big task. But enthusiasm seems to be increasing and in fact, some district firefighters now have "fire effects data collection" explicitly listed in their job duties. Line officers in the audience underscored the critical nature of this information and support the continuation of this long-term process.

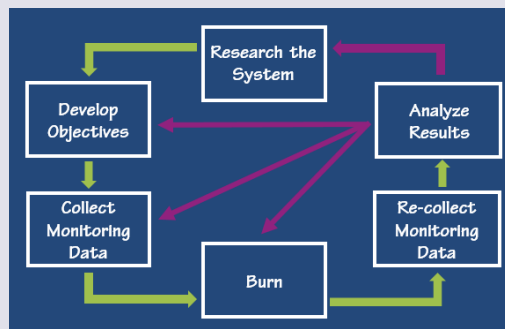
Rob Klein spoke about the adaptive management cycle that the national park is immersed in. Managers use data to make adjustments to burn timing or firing patterns, to change objectives, and develop a restoration process that incorporates both long-term objectives and objectives for individual burns.

Jean Lorber shared results from an extremely focused plot-based project, which he also connected to landscape-scale imagery. Both efforts are extremely valuable and work hand-in-hand as managers are trying to determine what fire is doing across nearly two million acres of national forest in Virginia.

Panelists and the audience concurred that fire effects are complicated. Fully answering questions through monitoring can be challenging. Keys to success include:

- a commitment to long-term monitoring;
- use of robust and uniform methodologies;
- a focus initially on major trends—don't attempt to answer very detailed questions; and
- coordination of regional monitoring efforts and analyses where possible.

In summary, we need to use data *and* photos *and* intuition *and* experience to increase support of our burn program by our public and our partners. Even though our monitoring trends appear to be tracking research results, we should continue to re-measure our plots, evaluate our burning and reconsider our desired future conditions.



The adaptive management cycle is an iterative process. At any point, we can change our course.

featured presentations from the Chestatee-Chattahoochee RC&D, Forest Service and The Nature Conservancy, followed by group discussion of plans to expand Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network work in the SBR, as well as expansion of the successful Fire Learning Trail on the Grandfather Ranger District. The day concluded with a presentation on the ecological effects of prescribed burning in the SBR.

As always, the workshop closed with members reconnected, re-energized—and ready to get back to work across the wide network.



For more information about the SBR FLN, contact:

Margit Bucher
mbucher@tnc.org

Beth Buchanan is on detail until the fall.

The Fire Learning Network (FLN) 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, contact Lynn Decker
ldecker@tnc.org or (801) 320-0524.



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