Supporting Users, Improving BpS Models

LANDFIRE Interviews Kori Blankenship

Fire Ecologist Kori Blankenship joined the LANDFIRE (LF) program in 2004 as a GIS specialist at the Missoula Fire Sciences Lab, then moved to The Nature Conservancy's (TNC) LANDFIRE team in 2005. In her decade-plus at TNC, she has facilitated the creation of hundreds of vegetation models for ecosystems across the US. Kori's current focus is on applying LF products to addressing land management challenges on large landscapes through data customization, user support, and outreach efforts. Kori earned an M.S. in Geography from Western Washington University. She lives, works, and plays in Bend, Oregon.

How did you become involved with LF?

I first learned about LANDFIRE at a fire ecology conference in Florida in 2004 where my advisor introduced me to the LANDFIRE science lead. The stars aligned for me and the summer I finished my Master's was the same summer that LANDFIRE ramped up its staffing to complete the LANDFIRE National effort. I applied, got the job, and worked at the Fire Lab for about a year on the mapping side of the program. A colleague at the Lab told me about The Nature Conservancy position that I now hold.

What is your part in the LF Program these days?

I have two roles: support the development and improvement of BpS models, and help users apply the data. My recent focus has been on working with experts around the country to review, update, and improve the BpS model set. I also develop online technical help materials and provide one-on-one support to users working on projects. The latter is my favorite because I like using LF data to address real land management questions.

You are particularly skilled at helping users adapt LF data for local use. What do you see as the most common challenges / opportunities in that realm?

First, while LF is an amazing resource, the data are not local data. Therefore, spatial data users are challenged because the information available to them, LF or otherwise, is not tailored to their specific landscape or needs. That said, users can make the data that ARE available to them work better.

Second, a common complaint is that the vegetation types aren't mapped quite right for an area or that key types are missing. There are many reasons for these types of problems, but some common solutions include supplementing LF with other information and reclassifying vegetation types based on expert review. For example, I've worked on projects where users wanted a more detailed wetland classification than LF offered, so we stamped in data from the National Wetlands Inventory. This type of work isn't particularly difficult, but it does take time.

You write LF tutorials and guides. Which have seen the highest demand, and what are the challenges in developing them?

Surprisingly, my basic GIS tutorials like "How to Overlay Grids" get the most hits on the LF YouTube Channel. But, the work I'm most proud of is the guide that I assisted Dom Helmbrecht with writing: Modifying LANDFIRE Geospatial Data for Local Applications. It is intended to help people really understand LANDFIRE data. I think the biggest challenge is knowing what people need help with, and then learning how best to provide that help.

In addition to being a fire ecologist, you are also red-carded. Tell us about that.

I started my career in natural resources at the bottom of the federal pay scale as a GS-2 Forestry Aid. I was sent to fire camp my first week on the job and was issued my red card. I worked summers on fire crews for the USFS and NPS, which is when I became fascinated by wildfire and the complexity of fire management.

Today I spend most of my work day in front of a computer, much of it running models, and while I enjoy that, I really get the most enjoyment from hands-on, outside work. (Read Kori's blog: Will Trade Computer for Driptorch)

More from Kori:

- Updating the LANDFIRE Fuel Data Jumpstarts Local Planning Efforts
- A state-and-transition simulation modeling approach for estimating the historical range of variability

More information: contact Kori.