



# Fire Learning Network Notes from the Field

April 2011

## Big Wilson Prescribed Fire

## Allegheny Highlands FLN George Washington- Jefferson National Forest



*George Washington-Jefferson National Forest, with the Big Wilson prescribed fire burn unit in the foreground*

**As part of the 18,000-acre** Warm Springs Mountain Restoration Project and the Allegheny Highlands Fire Learning Network, The Nature Conservancy and the George Washington-Jefferson National Forest are collaborating to conduct and monitor effects on one of the largest prescribed burns in both organizations' history in the state of Virginia.

Known as the Big Wilson Prescribed Fire, when completed the burn will cover over 6,000 acres, draped over both the TNC Warm Springs Mountain Preserve

and the USFS Warm Springs Ranger District. While 6,000 acres is very large for a prescribed burn, burns on this landscape scale are more cost effective per acre and have more variable fire effects than smaller burns. From an ecological standpoint, this means that the fire will achieve a range of effects, which land managers believe will better meet their forest restoration goals, including improving the condition of fire-adapted forest types, wildlife habitat enhancement and fuel reduction. It also reduces the amount of firelines that have to be installed.

The working plan is to conduct the fire over a period of days or weeks, allowing natural fire breaks such as creeks and rocky areas to slow and modify the fire progression. From an ecological standpoint, this means that the fire will achieve a range of effects that enables the land managers to better meet their forest restoration goals, including improving the condition of fire-adapted forest types, wildlife habitat enhancement and fuel reduction.

This high-complexity fire got its roots in March of 2008, when the NEPA planning began for the whole Restoration Project. Since then, staff from the Conservancy and Forest Service have worked along with volunteers to implement pre-burn vegetation monitoring (and post-burn monitoring on some treated burn units), start avian response monitoring, prepare miles of fireline, and write numerous burn plans.

Finally, during this very wet spring, crews were able to begin “blacklining”—burning four miles of the edge of the larger burn area to speed up ignition later on. Stay tuned for updates!

**For more information about this cooperative burn project, contact:**  
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*Top: NEPA documents to permit the Big Wilson Prescribed Burn were developed during a planning process for the Warm Springs Mountain Restoration Project that started in March 2008.*

*Center: Crews made up of fire practitioners from the USDA Forest Service and The Nature Conservancy conduct ignitions to create a “blackline” along the perimeter of the proposed burn unit.*

*Bottom: Communications among partners, developed over years of working together as part of the Fire Learning Network, have been key before, during and after the burn.*



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](mailto:ldecker@tnc.org) or (801) 320-0524.



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