Central Appalachians FLN Annual Workshop

Fire Learning Network
**Notes from the Field**

October 23-24, 2018
Blacksburg, Virginia

"You can see what it takes to get science out there to managers, get it into their decisions, to share lessons learned, to discuss opportunities. It really takes relationships and relationships mean face-to-face work. And time."

In late October, 76 partners from across the 19-million-acre Central Appalachians FLN landscape spent time together to strengthen the science and relationships for better management. Dan McKeague (district ranger, George Washington and Jefferson National Forests) welcomed participants from over 22 organizations, agencies and academic institutions to the Eastern Divide Ranger District. McKeague delivered an overview of area history and a preview of the field tour to one of their showcase management areas on the district.

After brief updates from each landscape in the network, Phil Manuel (senior fore-caster at NOAA) gave a weather outlook for the rest of the fall and the upcoming spring fire season. He also noted that September and October brought systems that dumped 150-400 percent of normal rainfall in most of Virginia.

Departure From Normal Last 60 Days
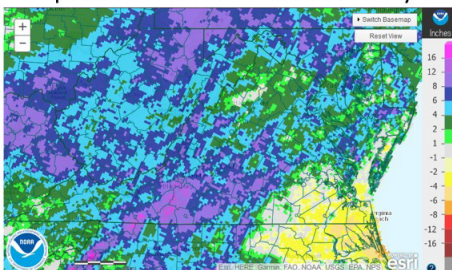
Surplus rainfall entire state... 150 to 400 percent of normal. Exception... southeast Virginia.

Credit: NOAA (Phil Manuel)

In the spirit of making the most out of unpredictable weather situations, Manuel then joined fire managers Chris Minor (TNC), Sam Lindblom (TNC) and Butch Shaw (USFS) on a panel to discuss widening burn windows. Capacity limitations are an ongoing barrier to getting more fire on the ground—but recognizing opportunities to burn on marginal days provides options for increasing acres burned. Managers had many examples of taking advantage of these "shoulder" days to conduct successful blackline operations, dramatically reducing capacity needed to complete burn operations later. Experimenting with suboptimal days can sometimes mean failure, but sharing the lessons learned sets us up for later success.

The annual workshop provides a venue for critical collaboration between scientists and managers. Dr. Adam Coates (Virginia Tech) gave an overview of research in fuel estimation in the Eastern U.S.; this included a preview of the Photo Guide for Estimating Fuel Loading in the Southern Appalachians, a general technical report that will be published by the Southern Research Station in 2019. Coates solicited suggestions from managers and scientists for how to apply this framework to a tool for the Central Appalachians. Other research topics discussed at the workshop included how fire behavior and fire effects can be attributed to seasonality, avian response to landscape scale burning, and how seasonality may have different impacts on water quality, regeneration and fuel loading.

Participants then spent much of the afternoon in one of three concurrent skill sessions—"Fireline Leadership Development," "FEMO Know-How: Tools for Burn Day Fire Effects Monitoring" or "Building Resilient Collaborations through Trust."
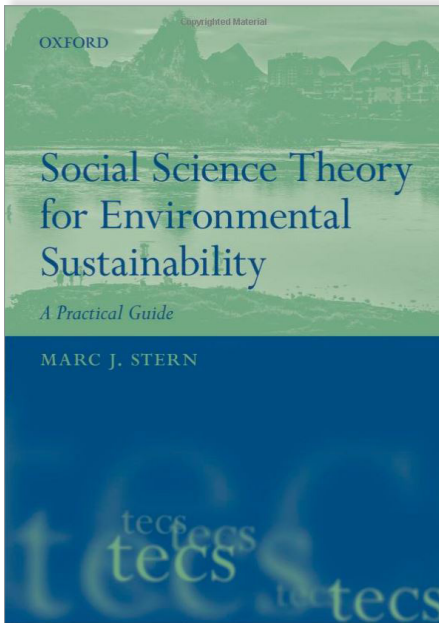

Credit: USFS (Dan Martin)

The leadership development session, led by Dan Martin (USFS fire management officer), focused on some of the pitfalls of leadership in the fire service, and identifying techniques to help avoid or adapt to them. Field exercises (*above*) had participants building relationships and skills in leadership.

In the FEMO session, participants shared tools and reporting formats to standard-ize data collection methods across different partner burns. According to one participant, "ensuring that fire effects monitors' observations are consistent and concise can sometimes be difficult. Synthesizing those observations into a finalized report can also be challenging. Getting together with other FEMOs really helped generate new ideas on how to improve the quality of my reports."

Partner Statement on Prescribed Fire

The National Wild Turkey Federation announced its recently released position statement in support of prescribed fire. In part, it says:

> "Prescribed fire is one of the primary tools used to create and improve habitat for wild turkeys and other species that depend on young-growth, or early successional habitat. Without fire, the least expensive and most efficient management tool we have available, maintaining current turkey populations would be much more difficult and expensive. As such, the NWTF strongly supports the use of prescribed fire to achieve habitat management objectives that will create ideal habitat for wild turkeys."

Ross Melinchuk
Vice President of Conservation
Full statement: https://www.nwtf.org/about/state-news/prescribed-fire-letter

How trust can be built strategically to maintain resilient collaboratives was explored through discussion and exercises led by Dr. Marc Stern (Virginia Tech). His 20 years of research in human dimensions of natural resources is summed up in his useful *Social Science Theory for Environmental Sustainability: A Practical Guide*. (Read about a study of over 500 NEPA processes showing that effective collaboration through all steps led to more efficient processes overall.)

On the second day, the group traveled to two management areas on the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests, where Forest Service staff in fire, silviculture and wildlife led discussions in the field. The Rocky Mountain and Kelly Flats burn units showcased treatments ranging from timber harvest and burning on the cold/wet end of a burn window to a site with four burn entries and high oak regeneration. The group discussed how management should be adapted in the highly successful stages of oak regeneration—to burn or not to burn? (Or rather, *when* to burn?)

In spite of the unusually wet weather, the Central Appalachians FLN is ready to make the most of marginal days, to work on building capacity and qualifications through training opportunities, and to continue to invest in our invaluable partnerships.

"The flash presentations were a great way to quickly expose us to a wide variety of topics, from fuel models to fire's impacts on bird populations. I'll definitely be following up with a number of the presenters."

For more on the Central Appalachians regional FLN:

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A carpet of oak regeneration benefits from canopy openings resulting from repeated fire entries in Kelly Flats. Portions of the unit have also had timber management. © TNC (Laurel Schablein)