



Fire Learning Network
Notes from the Field

First Fire: Reflections International Prescribed Fire Training Exchange

Northern New Mexico ~ September 2014



An international group of fire practitioners gathered in northern New Mexico to share and build on their diversity of experiences and fire cultures. Hosted by the Santa Fe National Forest and the Valles Caldera National Monument, about 30 practitioners from Andorra, Argentina, Costa Rica, Mexico, Portugal, Spain, Puerto Rico and several states completed training exercises, toured sites of recent wildfires and treatments to discuss fire effects, and conducted controlled burns that will help protect the forests and communities in this landscape.



I visited this TREX during its second week, for my first exposure to prescribed fire in the field. After years of reading, writing, talking and mapping fire, I knew a lot about burning ... and nothing at all. Here is what I (re)learned that week.

Planning. Lots of planning. Months of it before we arrived, of course. But plenty on a daily basis, too. A morning briefing to set the stage for the day. Another on-site, to cover the details of the burn. For a more complex burn, more briefings of the various subgroups. Not to mention the planning for logistical matters: feeding and sheltering 30 people in a small, remote town for two weeks. Moving everyone to and from daily assignments. Keeping everything from PPE and batteries to TP and cough drops supplied.

Patience. It's about patience. When people say that burns are carefully prescribed, and that we wait for the correct conditions, it's not lip service. When 40 people gather for a burn briefing, and wait for all the checks to be made, and wait some more, and then some aspect of the weather isn't right, no grumbling: just pack up and go on to an alternate task. And when the burn is a 'go,' the methodical briefing, test fire, lighting, then patrolling and holding, patrolling and holding.

The importance of the dispersion index. A little smoke goes a long way, as far as one's nose and eyes are concerned.

Time. Half a minute is an eternity when filming a set-up shot (one of my media assignments). On the other hand, the recommended 15 seconds for answers during interviews took no time at all to fly by. Not to mention the 25 seconds allowed for the fire shelter test.

And at TREX, the days are long, but the week, too short.

People. In the end, the people are what it's about. When I arrived a week into the TREX, a group of strangers had already coalesced into a close-knit unit. And over and over, the reply to the question "Why do you choose this kind of work?" was about people: those you work with, and those you work for, in nearby communities and in the world at large. Fire wasn't the only warm thing there.



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