

BUILDING COLLABORATIVES FOR ON-THE-GROUND RESULTS

Case Study: Developing an All Hands All Lands Burn Team for Co-Management of Fire in New Mexico

PERFACT: Promoting Ecosystem Resilience and Fire Adapted Communities Together



INDIGENOUS PEOPLES BURNING NETWORK

Promoting Ecosystem Resilience and Fire Adapted Communities Together (PERFACT) is a cooperative agreement between The Nature Conservancy, USDA Forest Service and agencies of the Department of the Interior. Through the Fire Learning Network, Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network, Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges and the Indigenous Peoples Burning Network, PERFACT helps people across the country work collaboratively to improve outcomes for communities and the landscapes in which they are embedded.

Five years ago, there was essentially no non-governmental capacity for using fire for forest management in New Mexico. But there was a lot of forested land—federal, state and private—in need of fire, for forest health and, more urgently, to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires. Partners are weaving together several threads of work under PERFACT to help build solutions.



Laying the Groundwork: The Forest Stewards Guild

The Guild is a national organization that “practices and promotes responsible forestry as a means of sustaining the integrity of forest ecosystems and the human communities dependent upon them.” For 25 years, Santa Fe staff have worked with forest-dependent communities in northern New Mexico struggling to find an alternate economic base after unsustainable commercial forestry was closed down in the 1980s and 90s. Central to this work is engaging with those most affected—the pueblos and largely Hispanic communities nestled in the forests—and with underserved and under-represented urban populations. The Guild’s connections in the state, with stake-holders including state and federal agencies, Rocky Mountain Youth Corps and The Nature Conservancy are also key.



They could see that forest restoration work alone wasn’t enough—the forests needed fire. But the seasonal timing was wrong for the state’s Forest Service fire crews: New Mexico’s prime prescribed fire season falls in August and September, just when the federal workforce is being drawn to California and other western states as their wildfire season peaks.



Lighting the Fire: Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges

In 2008 and 2010, the Guild and the State Land Office thinned hundreds of acres of ponderosa pine and mixed conifer forests on state trust lands, and realized that fire was also needed. In 2011 the Guild and State Land Office began considering using the TRES model to get the burning done. Then in 2012, the first Spanish-language TRES was held on the Santa Fe National Forest, and it was evident that the model could work in this landscape. Further planning led to the successful implementation of the Black Lake TRES in 2013 and again in 2014. Lessons from this were applied to numerous TRES and cooperative burns on private lands over the next few years, with the Guild providing strategic direction and organizing capacity, and the Fire Learning Network and TRES coaches coming in to provide fire leadership.

Growing Support: Rio Grande Water Fund

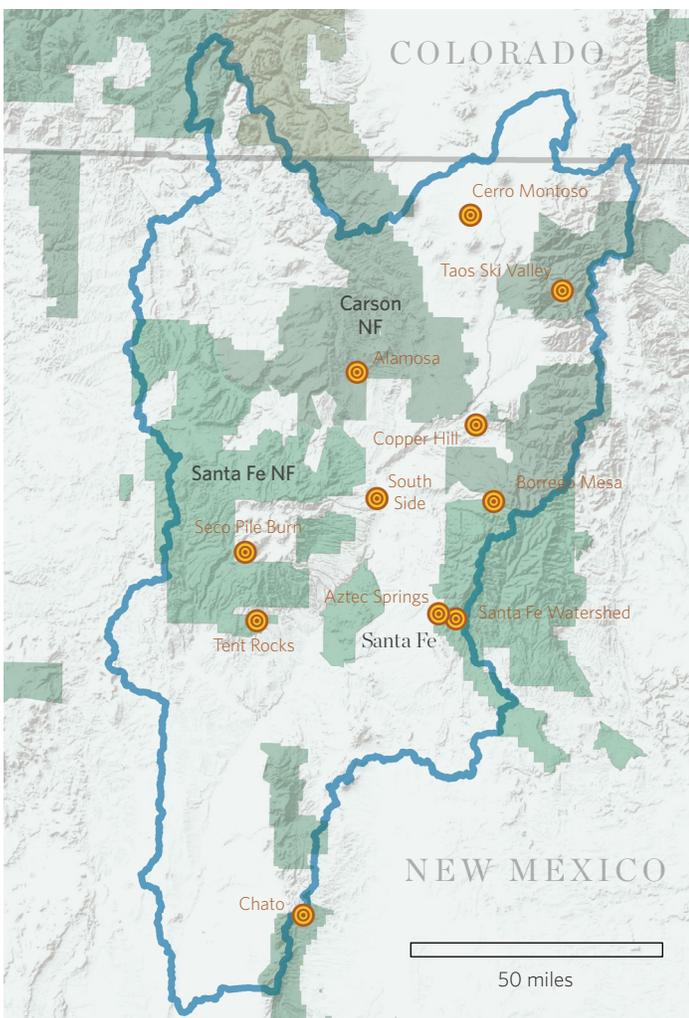
Meanwhile, it was increasingly clear that forest health work needed to be scaled-up dramatically. In the 1.7-million-acre watershed that feeds the Rio Grande—which supplies water to half the state’s population—much of the forested land is overgrown and at risk for high-severity fires that would leave the landscape vulnerable to flooding and erosion, and cities and towns without clean drinking water. In July 2014 The Nature Conservancy and partners launched the Rio Grande Water Fund, establishing a mechanism to coordinate and leverage funding for a 20-year plan to address the area’s fire and water challenges. This landscape and project are now the focus of Fire Learning Network work in the state.

“All Hands All Lands is both the end of an arc that got started a long time ago, as well as the beginning of a brand new arc. It’s a model for how we start cost-effectively working on a landscape scale.”

—Dave Lasky, Forest Stewards Guild
quoted in *Bitterroot Magazine*

Building a Core: Gravitas Peak Wildland Fire Module

Elsewhere, a volunteer firefighter from Colorado found himself at a TRES in northern California. TRES was a great fit for him, and for his vision of creating a wildland fire module that would be a career pathway for under-served youth. He almost immediately became a member of the new TRES coaches network, and started making the module a reality. Again, the networks helped—the module found its first home in a partnership with a non-profit that had grown from a contractor’s work with TRES in the Great Plains. But an organization with more administrative capacity was needed for the module to reach its full potential.



In its first year, the All Hands All Lands Burn Team helped complete 6,236 acres of burning on 11 projects that spanned nearly the entire length of the Rio Grande Water Fund landscape (blue outline).

Adapted from map by Forest Stewards Guild

Scaling-Up: Using More Fire

Back in New Mexico, through 2016 and 2017 the Guild continued to lead TRES with funding support from PERFECT and with skilled leaders coming in from the TRES coaches network. The projects got more complex; trust and skills grew. So when the Rio Grande Water Fund received implementation funding in 2017 and put out a request for proposals, the Guild—along with the Chama Peak Land Alliance and Rocky Mountain Youth Corps—put together a proposal that included significant prescribed burning. Others primarily proposed thinning, so this stood out. The Rio Grande Water Fund recognized the value of fire as a restoration tool, and the Guild’s readiness to implement it, and funded the proposal. This allowed the Guild to hire a fire manager, giving them local fire leadership capacity for the first time. The Gravitas Peak module founder joined the team and assembled the core crew needed to lead prescribed burns.

Coming Together: All Hands All Lands Burn Team

With this, the pieces were in place to make a qualitative jump in fire capacity. In 2018, the Guild mobilized the All Hands All Lands (AHAL) Burn Team to support partner burns throughout the Rio Grande Water Fund landscape. AHAL is a flexible model rather than a static crew. A small core of qualified, experienced fire leaders manages an on-call list of volunteers, contractors, cooperators and paid staff. When partners need additional capacity for a burn, there is now a central place to call, and to coordinate among partners to share resources. The Gravitas Peak Wildland Fire Module crew can provide leadership and coordination for the resulting team that comes together for a burn. Youth opportunities are central to the team as well, with the Guild’s Forest Stewards Youth Corps playing a central role, along with a strong partnership with the Rocky Mountain Youth Corps. The module provides training opportunities, integrating youth corps members into AHAL and recruiting graduates to staff the module.

Seeing Success: Action on the Ground

In its first year AHAL supported 11 burns, with burn team members from the Forest Stewards Youth Corps and Rocky Mountain Youth Corps, as well as local fire departments, pueblos, private landowners, volunteers and others.

Looking ahead, the Guild and its Rio Grande Water Fund partners plan to continue to invest in AHAL with a focus on returning fire to private and other non-federal lands in the watershed while building the workforce to keep the successes coming.



Circular photos are from the spring 2018 Chama TRES.

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The PERFECT cooperative agreement is an equal opportunity provider.