



Fire Learning Network Notes from the Field



Getting the Word Out: Preparation Key to Media Success for Prescribed Fire Training Exchange

New Mexico Prescribed Fire Training Exchange

September 2012

A team of fire practitioners on a Fire Learning Network training exchange in New Mexico has been in the news everywhere from small-town paper and regional TV to the *New York Times*—and the coverage is all about good fire and how they're working to do more of it. Since 2008, the FLN has hosted 19 prescribed training exchanges like this one, where crews from multiple organizations, a wide array of geographic locations, and a diversity of fire backgrounds come to burn and learn together. In addition to traditional fireline skills with drip torches, ATVs and engines, they also learn about the local biology, fire history and socioeconomic context of fire. And they learn to talk about fire. "The more people know about prescribed fire and its benefits to the forests and local communities, the easier it is for us to help these forests back to health and keep people safer," according to Neil Chapman, a participant from the Conservancy's Hart Prairie Preserve in Arizona. Working with the media to craft interesting stories plays a vital role.

Fire managers can be media-shy, so by including media outreach in these training events, participants have an opportunity to learn about the planning needed to engage reporters safely and effectively, and to become more skilled in conveying their messages. Over the course of five years of training exchanges, organizers have learned a good deal about both the logistical planning and the actual talking aspects of working successfully with media. It all came together this September on the Santa Fe National Forest.

go a long way toward decreasing the role of luck though.

Know what you want to say. Know your key message and rehearse key phrases so they come easily to you. In front of a camera is no place to shoot from the hip. Speak in plain language—"forests and grasslands" is much better than "vegetative communities"—and without using acronyms. Connect your message to what the reporter's audience cares about. And get everyone on the same page.

Some Lessons Learned

Make it a priority. Good media coverage doesn't just happen. Success comes from a strong partnership between outreach experts and fire practitioners who can engage reporters in an authentic experience. Logistics and messages both require careful attention. Getting a good story out takes planning, time, flexibility, commitment...and just a little bit of luck. Planning ahead and making communication a priority can

Participating Organizations

- Centro de Investigación y Extensión Forestal Andino Patagónico (Argentina)
- Comisión Nacional de Áreas Naturales Protegidas (Mexico)
- Ministerio de Agricultura, Alimentación y Medio Ambiente (Spain)
- National Park Service—Bandelier NM
- New Mexico Highlands University
- Servicio Provincial de Manejo de Fuego (Chubut, Argentina)
- The Nature Conservancy—Arizona, Costa Rica, Michigan, New Mexico
- USDA Forest Service—Santa Fe NF

Plain Speaking: Say this...

- forests and grasslands
- outdoors
- wildlife and plants
- controlled burning
- natural benefits like clean water

Not...

- vegetative communities
- environment, ecosystem
- species
- prescribed fire
- ecosystem services

Photos, above: Traditional equipment orientation (left) and pre-fire briefings (right) are part of each FLN training exchange. Less traditional are the media training and discussions of the ecological, social and economic aspects of prescribed fire on the local landscape.

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Get permission to talk. Make sure everyone has permission from their agency or organization to speak to the media (and knows what the limits, if any, are).

Reach out to reporters. Having a press release available is great (and will sometimes be printed almost as-is in a local paper), but nothing can replace personal contact. The FLN has worked with some reporters a number of times over the course of several years, which allows trust to develop on both sides, leading to more interesting (and accurate) stories.

Take care of reporters. A fireline is by definition a busy and dangerous place. They can get a great story and pictures there, but make sure that they have full PPE (personal protective equipment) as well as constant oversight. They will probably also need transportation to and from the site, since access is usually limited. Assign someone to this task: assume the reporter is on deadline and can't wait for the end of the burn day.

Be flexible. As with everything else on the fireline, expect surprises.

Don't expect perfection. The story will get a little garbled now and then, or the one thing you wish you hadn't said will end up in the story. Learn from it, and keep on going.

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All participants on training exchanges are briefed and prepared to speak with the media, building their comfort with the experience, and giving the reporter a richer story than is typically available from designated spokespersons.

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Links to Media Coverage of Training Event, September 16-30

Rio Rancho Observer (local newspaper)

"Fire Experts Train in Area Forests"

http://www.rroobserver.com/news/local/article_e07b0466-feb1-11e1-adf8-0019bb2963f4.html

Univision New Mexico (regional television), Jim Morrison

regional newscast (story begins at 22:21)

<http://www.kluz.tv/segmento/33/streaming/noticieros.html>

KSFR Radio, Santa Fe (local public radio), Charles Maynard

regional news cast (story begins at 12:02)

[http://www.publicbroadcasting.net/ksfr/news.newsmain/article/0/1/1946852/KSFR.Local/%3Cb%3ESept..21.At.Noon.Rabies.incidents.up.\(Listen\)%3Cb%3E](http://www.publicbroadcasting.net/ksfr/news.newsmain/article/0/1/1946852/KSFR.Local/%3Cb%3ESept..21.At.Noon.Rabies.incidents.up.(Listen)%3Cb%3E)

Los Alamos Monitor (local newspaper), Tris DeRoma

"Fire Network Hosts Exchange"

<http://www.lamonitor.com/content/fire-network-hosts-exchange-more-photos-added>

KOA-TV (regional television), Eric Green

"International Firefighters Train in New Mexico"

<http://www.koat.com/news/new-mexico/albuquerque/International-firefighters-train-in-New-Mexico/-/9153728/16775892/-/1wedmal-/index.html>

New York Times Green blog (national paper), Glenn Swain

"Burning a Forest to Save It"

<http://green.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/09/26/burning-a-forest-to-save-it/#more->

Greenwire (national online news site), April Reese

"Learning Goes Both Ways in Nature Conservancy's Fire School"

<http://www.eenews.net/gw/> (October 3, 2012)

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