



WOMEN-IN-FIRE PRESCRIBED FIRE TRAINING EXCHANGES: BUILDING A MORE INCLUSIVE FIRE MANAGEMENT CULTURE FOR RESILIENCE & SUSTAINABILITY



Wildfire is complex and multifaceted: depending on circumstances, it can be an essential ecological process, an important conservation tool, or a threat to natural and human communities. And fire-related threats to nature and people—from too little rejuvenating fire to catastrophic wildfires—are worsening across the U.S. at an alarming pace.

We face a new fire reality. We need new approaches.

Promoting Ecosystem Resilience and Fire Adapted Communities Together (PERFACT)—a cooperative agreement between The Nature Conservancy, USDA Forest Service and agencies of the Department of the Interior—is leading the way with new approaches. Work under PERFACT includes finding ways to significantly expand controlled burning across the U.S., which will require providing additional formal and experiential training opportunities, as well as diversifying the fire management workforce.

Investing in Diversity Benefits Us All

As with any complex issue, diverse perspectives are essential to finding workable solutions. The majority of professional fire workers today are white, male and agency-based. This has created a self-perpetuating culture that excels at rapid response—but is less effective than it could be at addressing emerging challenges.

While the Forest Service is currently led by a woman, Chief Vicki Christiansen, only about 10 percent of federal agency fire positions are filled by women, and the proportion in key leadership roles is much smaller. In the Conservancy and across training burns hosted by PERFACT projects, about a quarter of burners are women. We are working together to do even better.



“ I’ve been in fire suppression for seven years and have always loved the work, but it’s been difficult to keep coming back each season to a culture that doesn’t feel accommodating to women.... we have some work to do as an entire group on creating a new culture that encourages diversity of all kinds.



Lenya Quinn-Davidson leads the WTREX program, working with local and national partners from government agencies, universities and across the Conservancy.

Nationally, efforts to recruit women into fire have increased in recent years, but many agencies have problems retaining female fire professionals. The challenges women face range from feelings of isolation and being undervalued, to overt harassment and even assault. Women find that it’s hard to secure coveted training slots, balance work and family expectations, compete for promotions, and advocate for themselves when they are the only woman on their district or on their crew, and when they don’t have strong mentors and role models to support and encourage them. Few women work in fire, and even fewer fill leadership roles, so for women coming up through the ranks, it’s hard to be what they rarely see: women as empowered, valued fire leaders.

Enter Women-in-Fire Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges

Women-in-Fire Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges (WTREX) are modeled after the Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges (TREX) that got started in Great Plains Fire Learning Network landscapes in 2008. The TREX model assembles diverse participants for two weeks of hands-on training, treatments and outreach; it melds live-fire training with deeper learning on fire ecology, policy and social dynamics. WTREX reframes this model around women in fire, bringing both women and men together to burn and learn together in a supportive, positive environment.

The inaugural WTREX was held in northern California in October 2016. Lenya Quinn-Davidson, lead organizer of WTREX, and others on the team were nervous about how the fire management community might perceive it, and were unsure about participants’ expectations. As it turned out, the event was a resounding success.

“ WTREX felt like a natural extension of the Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges the Conservancy had been offering since 2008.



Women-in-Fire Training Exchanges provide unique training opportunities, mentorship, awareness and social connections. As a grassroots network that engages fire practitioners of all genders and backgrounds, WTREX is dedicated to evolving the fire culture through the empowerment and advancement of women, as well as bringing awareness to the value of diversity in the workforce.

The first WTREX daylighted deeper needs than the organizers had anticipated: women in fire not only needed training opportunities, but they were hungry to learn from and connect with other women in fire—to feel a sense of community, comfort and shared passion in their work. They were also eager to develop male allies—and the male participants at WTREX were equally eager to learn, grow and better advocate for women in fire.

“What hit me the hardest was that **there is a very big problem in fire, and that I’m a part of the problem.** I’ve always thought I was a good guy, but listening to these women speak candidly about their experiences as women in a man’s world, I realized how complicated the problems are. I’ve been guilty of using language that is hurtful, of being degrading without meaning to. I’m conscious of this now, and I’ll be able to check myself. I’ll also share these things with the people I love—my crew—‘Hey man, do you know how that might make people feel?’ Those 10 days were full of so much ... I feel selfish because **I think I took away more from the WTREX than anyone else who was there.**

Inclusive. Powerful. Transformative.

WTREX events are unique in that they create a supportive environment and build a network of relationships that last beyond a single event. Participants learn they’re not alone in the challenges they face working in a male-dominated field, and they return home inspired and empowered. Women also gain practical information they wouldn’t find anywhere else, such as techniques for wielding a chainsaw if you happen to have a female build. Participants of all genders are invited to apply, and about 10 percent of the participants each year are men.

The WTREX has a strong focus on women in fire, but the team also recognizes the importance of diversity more generally. Just as biodiversity lends itself to ecological resilience, human diversity will contribute to the resilience and success of the fire management system. The WTREX team recognizes a need for diverse perspectives, backgrounds and experiences, and believes in providing a training environment where everyone—all genders, backgrounds, and experience levels—is honored and valued.

“**I heard women ask questions and express difficulties** that I’ve had, and **I saw women answer those questions and offer solutions.** And for me, seeing women doing the jobs of Firing Boss, Burn Boss, Operations and Incident Command is a big deal. I struggle to explain what it is that happens—**it is a positive shift, a door opening, a freeing.** In short, it was an amazingly wonderful experience, one I recommend for everyone.



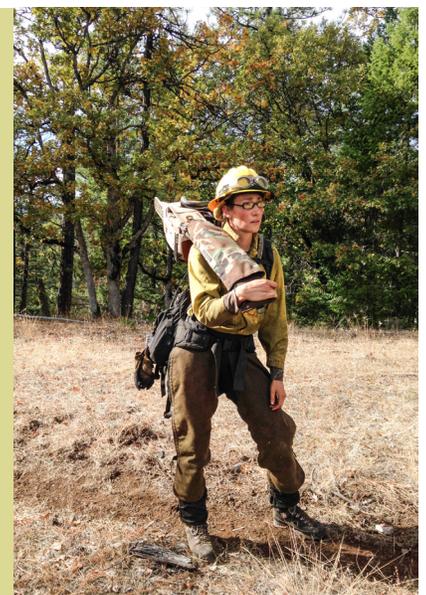
It was powerful;

it was healing;

it was motivating;

it was inspiring;

it was energizing.





The third WTREX was held this March 2019 near Tallahassee, Florida. Participants worked on formal fire qualifications and taskbooks, burned more than 600 acres, enjoyed workshops on a wide range of topics, and developed personal and professional relationships that will persist throughout their careers. It's fair to say that the experience offered through WTREX—with its unique combination of live-fire training, professional development, personal growth and social connection—is unlike anything else in fire. And the demand is clear: every year, the team turns away about three-quarters of the applicants due to lack of space.

Women-in-Fire Moving Forward

Women-in-Fire Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges have proved their value to both the individuals who have taken part and to the wildfire community. Planning for the 2020 WTREX is underway, and we are exploring ways to support an expansion of this model, so that we can reach more people and address additional aspects of diversity, and continue to grow the workforce we need for resilient landscapes and communities.

“Events like **WTREX are essential to creating this new culture**—one that develops and solicits different perspectives, new ideas, innovative approaches to problem-solving, and connection. Before WTREX, I spent a lot of time trying to decide if it was still worth it to keep fighting fire. I can't say that now the answer is suddenly clear and everything is fixed. But I can say that the women and men I met there have inspired me. **WTREX made me believe that we are capable of creating a new kind of fire community** that can be a good fit for anyone who wants to be a part of it.

LEARN MORE

Prescribed Fire Training Exchange program (and upcoming TREF): <http://nature.ly/trainingexchanges>

“Indulging in Fire: Reflections from the Women-in-Fire Training Exchange” (blog post)

<https://fireadaptednetwork.org/reflections-from-the-women-in-fire-training-exchange/>

For more about WTREX, contact Lenya Quinn-Davidson:

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WTREX is lighting a new path—cultivating a more diverse, equitable, innovative and ecologically sound fire management system.

Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges are supported by Promoting Ecosystem Resilience and Fire Adapted Communities Together (PERFACT), a cooperative agreement between The Nature Conservancy, USDA Forest Service and agencies of the Department of the Interior. For more about PERFACT, contact Marek Smith at marek_smith@tnc.org.

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