



WOMEN-IN-FIRE PRESCRIBED FIRE TRAINING EXCHANGES:

## CONNECTING, EMPOWERING, TRANSFORMING

Wildfire is complex and multifaceted: it can be an essential ecological and cultural process and an important conservation tool, but it can also be a threat to natural and human communities. And fire-related threats to nature and people—including too little beneficial fire and too much catastrophic fire—are worsening across the U.S. and the world at an alarming pace.

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

### Investing in Diversity Benefits Us All

As with any complex issue, diverse talents are essential to finding workable solutions. In the U.S., the majority of professional fire workers today are white, male and agency-based—and largely out of parity with affected populations, or with the groundswell of young, inspired people who want to work in fire management. While many of the most innovative industries select for diversity—in thought, talent and perspective—fire management has been socially and culturally stagnant, and the effects are real.

In the U.S., efforts to increase diversity in fire have grown in recent years, but many agencies have problems retaining female and other under-represented fire professionals. The challenges these groups face range from feelings of isolation and being undervalued, to overt harassment and even assault. They 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 alone 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.



Above: WTREX participants at Mariposa Grove, Yosemite National Park, 2017.

© Laurel Schablein/TNC

Top: WTREX crews in Florida, 2019, and South Africa, 2023.

“ 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.



WTREX in Virginia, 2022.  
© Daniel White/TNC

## 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) developed by The Nature Conservancy and other partners in 2008. A typical TREX 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 and other under-represented fire practitioners, bringing together people from all genders and backgrounds to burn and learn together in a supportive, positive environment.

The inaugural WTREX was held in northern California in October 2016, hosted by Lenya Quinn-Davidson, Fire Network Director for the University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources and Program Director for WTREX. Organizers were curious how the fire management community might perceive the event, and they were unsure about participants’ expectations. As it turned out, the event was a resounding success.

“ Every single person here was willing to help, to teach, and to listen without judgment. I have never progressed so fast or learned so much in such a safe environment and I didn’t expect to feel like this. It was so powerful to see so many ridiculously competent women absolutely tearing it up.



WTREX in North Carolina, 2023.  
© Sydney Bezanson/TNC

**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.**

“ 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.**”

First WTREX, Northern California, 2016.  
© Lenya Quinn-Davidson/UCANR



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.

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, and they return home inspired, empowered and connected.

Participants of all genders are invited to apply, and the team targets about 10-20% participation by men.

The WTREX has a strong focus on women in fire, but the team also recognizes the importance of diversity more generally.

“ **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.**





WTREX in northern Portugal, 2024.  
© Lenya Quinn-Davidson/UCANR



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

**UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA**  
Agriculture and Natural Resources

Fire Network

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

Just as biodiversity is key to ecological resilience, human diversity will contribute to resilience and success in fire management. 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.

By early 2024, WTREX events had been hosted in four U.S. states and in South Africa, Canada and Portugal. Participants have come from almost every U.S. state, from dozens of Tribes, and from more than 30 countries on every continent except Antarctica. WTREX has grown from a fire training program to a global movement. 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 applicants due to lack of space. The WTREX team is actively seeking support to grow the program, so they can continue to connect, empower and transform fire cultures throughout the U.S. and the world.

“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** about WTREX at <https://firenetworks.org/wtrex> or by contacting Lenya Quinn-Davidson at [lquinndavidson@ucanr.edu](mailto:lquinndavidson@ucanr.edu).



WTREX is part of the Fire Networks supported by Promoting Ecosystem Resilience and Fire Adapted Communities Together, a cooperative agreement between The Nature Conservancy, USDA Forest Service and agencies of the Department of the Interior. For more about the Fire Networks, contact Marek Smith at [marek\\_smith@tnc.org](mailto:marek_smith@tnc.org).

An equal opportunity provider