



Increasing Prescribed Fire Capacity: Working with Volunteer Fire Departments

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Crew members from WRTC, CAL FIRE and the Hayfork VFD (along with the Trinity County RCD and USFS, not pictured) wrap up a fun day of learning and burning on the Tule Creek Ranch in 2017. © WRTC (Piper McDaniel)



The Hayfork VFD chief trains local chainsaw crews on making weather observations at Tule Creek Ranch in 2016. © WRTC (David Jaramillo)

SITUATION Trinity County is a large (3,200 square miles), sparsely populated (14,500 residents) county with a mild Mediterranean climate—hot, dry summers, where dry lightning storms result in frequent fire starts across the landscape throughout the summer. About 80 percent of land in the county is managed by the U.S. Forest Service, with much of the rest held by timber companies and ranches. Residential development is clustered and dispersed; all of our communities are at high risk from wildfire.

For about 25 years, the Watershed Research and Training Center (WRTC) has worked on land management issues, focusing on ecosystem restoration and community resiliency. We began planning and implementing prescribed burns in 2012, which has required addressing a range of challenges—including limited local workforce capacity.

SOLUTION From the very start of its prescribed fire program, WRTC saw the need for a diverse local workforce, and for a large group of partners to work at the scale needed. The dozen VFDs already servicing communities across the county were a natural fit as key partners. With funding from a range of sources, we have now implemented over 1,000 acres of prescribed fire while providing training opportunities for several VFDs, along with personnel from CAL FIRE, USFS, Firestorm, Trinity County RCD and WRTC. The training is increasing both formal fire qualifications and readiness for wildfire response, and participants have been very happy with the experience of working together—and getting fire back onto the landscape.

Two local groups—Trinity County Fire Chiefs Association and Trinity County Fire Safe Council—meet monthly. WRTC is a core member of the council, and there is overlap between the two groups, which helps integrate their efforts. These relationships have allowed us to share information about our prescribed fire efforts with a large pool of potential partners, and have provided contacts leading to agreements with individual VFDs.

COSTS AND LOGISTICS WRTC coordinates the participation of VFDs in burns. VFDs are usually engaged for burns that take place within or adjoining their response area. VFD participation in a burn can take several forms. When we hire a VFD for a burn, they commit resources to help meet the burn plan requirements; an agreement with the VFD sets rates (for personnel and equipment) that are competitive and help support the department. Sometimes when a department can participate, but not commit to the burn, we have been able to offer a stipend. And sometimes VFD members participate as volunteers.

Our first agreement was with the Weaverville VFD, which has supported our program from the start. They have participated in some burns as committed resources, and have also been able to fill personnel and equipment needs on short notice, which is extremely valuable.

LESSONS LEARNED Scheduling volunteer firefighters—who also juggle job and family commitments—can be difficult. Likewise, good burn conditions cannot be ordered for particular weekends. So we no longer stress individual commitments for specific dates. We know and accept that many people will not be able to attend during a given burn window—but we always extend the invitation, knowing people will attend as they can. So far, this has worked out, and we have been able to support many individuals, and grow our workforce.



Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges (Trex) are part of *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 information about work under the PERFACT agreement, contact Marek Smith at marek_smith@tnc.org or (919) 794-4374. For more about Trex, contact Jeremy Bailey at jeremy_bailey@tnc.org or (801) 599-1394.

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