



Fire Learning Network Notes from the Field

Communications at the Southern Blue Ridge TRES

Pickens, South Carolina
October 19–November 9, 2018

Talking about Lighting Fire Near Recently Burned Communities

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The southern Blue Ridge Mountains were hit hard during the 2016 wildfire season. The region's fires that year included the Chimney Tops 2 ("Gatlinburg") Fire, the Pinnacle Mountain Fire and the Rough Ridge Fire. After they were out, partners in the Southern Blue Ridge Fire Learning Network came together to discuss how we would move forward with our controlled burn programs. With good reason, the public was easily triggered by the presence of smoke or fire. We recognized that we had to increase our communication about controlled burning and convey the role of fire in Blue Ridge forests. These efforts included putting in a Fire Learning Trail at Table Rock State Park near the footprint of the Pinnacle Mountain Fire. The goal was to let the public know that even though wildfires had just come through, there was still burning that had to be done.

Two years later, many of the same partners—including the South Carolina Forestry Commission, South Carolina State Parks, The Nature Conservancy and the Consortium of Appalachian Fire Managers and Scientists—came together once again, this time to support the communication efforts surrounding what would be the first Southern Blue Ridge Prescribed Fire Training Exchange (SBR TRES). Planning burns near communities that were recently affected by wildfire meant that we had to communicate clearly with the public (and among ourselves) to gain public support. We

needed a well-constructed message about the fire professionals who were traveling to this area to participate. And although we didn't want to revamp the fear of fire that 2016 brought, we wanted to portray those wildfires as evidence for the need to reduce fuels in our forests. Once again, we needed to push the message of "good fire"—meaning controlled burns that are set by trained professionals, in the right places, and backed up by science.

I had the amazing opportunity to serve on both the internal and external SBR TRES communications teams. Like other TRES, the SBR TRES was a two-week immersive training experience. Ours included more than 50 fire professionals from all over the world. We were based in Pickens, South Carolina, in view of the footprint of the Pinnacle Mountain Fire, the largest fire in the history of upstate South Carolina.

I took home innumerable lessons from this experience, many of which I'm still processing. The five listed below are the tip of the iceberg, but I think they apply to anyone trying to balance communicating internally and externally on an incident or during a long-term project.

1—Start Early

I remember thinking, "Three months is plenty of time to develop messages and products and then deliver them." Often it is, but TRES was a different kind of animal. Many of the people on our communications team act as a



About the author: Jenifer Bunty is the public information coordinator for the Consortium of Appalachian Fire Managers and Scientists. In general, this means she takes all of the great fire science research that is being produced and translates it so that it can be used by land managers and the public. Specifically, she manages social media channels and websites, and develops educational materials and publications. She works closely with the director to develop workshops, webinars and meetings as well. Prior to this position, she worked for The Nature Conservancy's Southern Blue Ridge Fire Learning Network, where she developed the now well-known Fire Learning Trail.

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one-person show in their day-to-day operations, but we had a team of more than 10 people creating social media content, liaising with the traditional media and even controlling traffic at burn units. It takes time to get that large of a group on the same page, especially when the individuals are used to autonomy. Our team-oriented approach had great advantages too, like leveraging our contacts for media coverage and building momentum with

Our editorial calendar allowed our communications team to collaborate on ideas, photos and links ahead of time. And we got pretty great results! (Visit this post: bit.ly/SBR_TREX_Facebook)

landowners and communities. Again, though, those leveraged opportunities only really apply if your message is consistent, so have your key messages planned out six months in advance. Some media outlets will tell you to contact them as the event gets closer, but others, like podcasts and cable shows, need to include you in their upcoming season plans. Having your messages outlined early also gives you more time to practice them for when the media outlets do come calling.

2—Build a Social Media Backbone

I've been running social media for the Consortium of Appalachian Fire Managers and Scientists for almost three years. I'm comfortable using Facebook, Twitter and other platforms for delivering fire-related updates, and I've seen how powerful those outlets are. So, before the SBR TREX started, I created the pieces of our online presence—a closed Facebook group for participants, a public-facing Facebook page and an SBR TREX Twitter account. We also created the SBR TREX website. Originally, we used the website to communicate with participants and as a data portal (they uploaded their documents and certifications to the site), but it also became a way for us to communicate with the public and local media. (Lesson: use social before, during and after the event!)

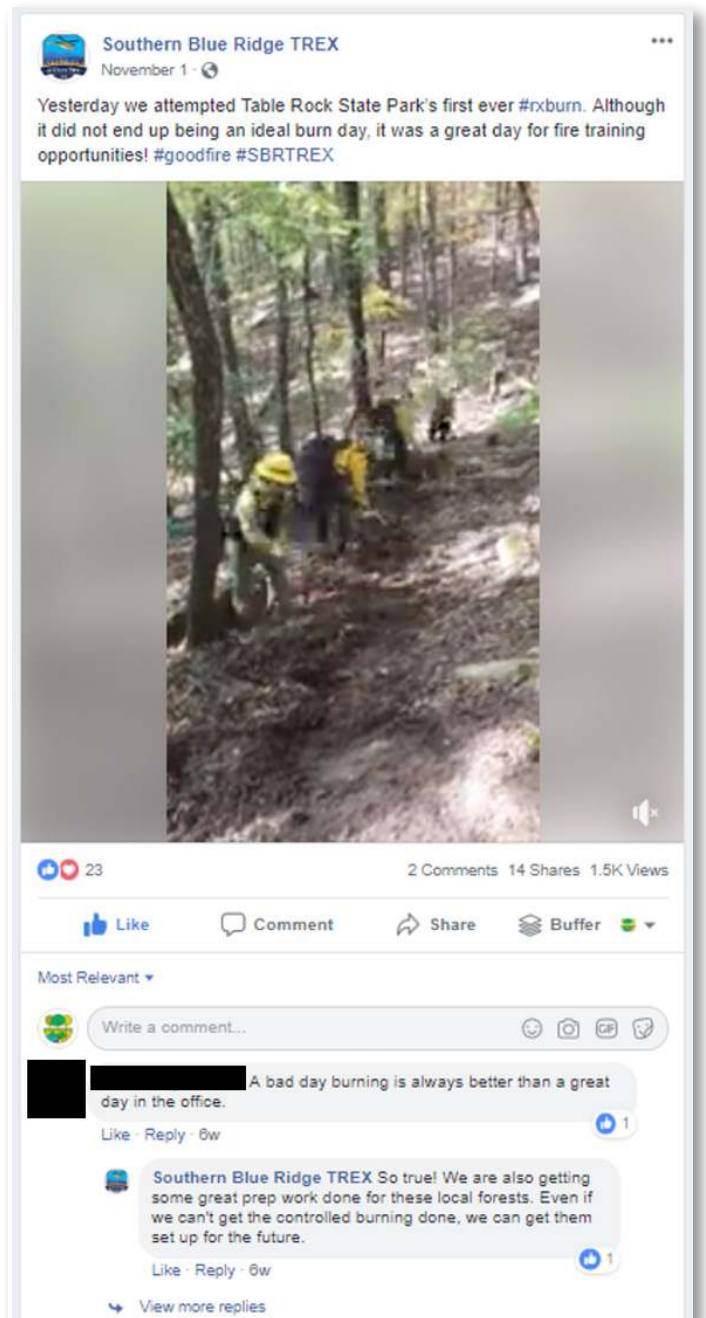
Our social media audience surprised me: we reached 27,000 people within a few days. The SBR TREX was planned by 12 partner agencies, 10 landowners, and participants from over 30 agencies and organizations. Our external communications lead, Kristen Austin (The Nature Conservancy), contacted all of our partner agencies

ahead of time to discuss where we would be posting, what we would post and how we would tag them. In fire management, we often talk about "building capacity" on the fireline by partnering with different agencies. This was a collaboration that helped all of us build our communication capacity by sharing photos, posts and contacts.

Given the level of interest in our online presence, we had to stay organized. Our team set up a social media content calendar prior to the SBR TREX; this greatly helped us keep our feet under us. (You may find a template for a social media editorial calendar useful.) A content calendar is especially helpful if you have more than one

person posting on social media and need a place to collaborate on ideas, photos and links ahead of time. In our content calendar, I also kept a list of tags, websites and hashtags for every agency and organization represented at SBR TREX. This made it easy to address posts to our partners and helped cultivate that communication capacity.

Building an online presence happened quickly for us, but it was largely due to a high number of dedicated working hours—it took our entire team. And we are still managing the SBR TREX Facebook page, Twitter account and website, weeks after the event! I remember a moment when I sat with three other members of our team,



██████████ Burning inside Tablerock? Where the fire was 2 years ago? There is a lot of deadwood in there since the fire. What would burning again now do to the forest? As far as plant life and erosion? Just curious.

Like · Reply · 6w



Southern Blue Ridge TREX Hey ██████████! These are great questions. The Pinnacle Mountain Fire (in 2016) burned about 2/3 of Table Rock State Park. The South Carolina Forestry Commission made a plan to set controlled burns in the areas that were not burned by the fire to help reduce fuels like dead wood. The plot they planned to burn today will protect an old Civilian Conservation Corps structure that could be threatened by wildfire. Controlled burns have been shown by research to be a really effective tool to help support native plants and prevent erosion. They burn at a very low intensity and don't typically go down to the soil.

Like · Reply · 6w

Four members of our team, each from a different agency or organization, worked to carefully respond to this single, brief Facebook comment. This may seem like overkill, but we've all seen how quickly a single comment can end up being viewed by thousands.

each of us from a different agency or organization, trying to carefully respond to a single Facebook comment. The commenter asked why we were burning when a wildfire had just come through two years ago. This may seem like overkill, but we've all seen how quickly a single comment can end up being viewed by thousands. Building a social media backbone like the one I've described takes a lot of effort, but if you do it right, your message will be heard loud and clear.

3—Have a Photo Plan

Right from the beginning, have a plan for how you will organize your photos and an idea of what projects you want to complete with them. Collecting photos at the SBR TREX was a full-time job. Unless you are extremely fortunate, you won't have a professional photographer at every operation. However, most people are happy to take photos of what they're doing, if they can. When collecting photos, I created a folder each day that had sub-folders for each fire crew or module. When someone gave me their photos for a day, I saved them in a folder labeled with the photographer's last name, under their crew folder. I figured that if I had any questions about the photos later on, I could consult the Incident Action Plan for the day and then know who to email my questions to. This generally worked

well, especially considering that we were in a place with limited internet. I'm now in the process of organizing all of these photos on Flickr, which will allow us to tag each photo and make them searchable by subject (e.g., Table Rock, drip torch, chainsaw, etc.).

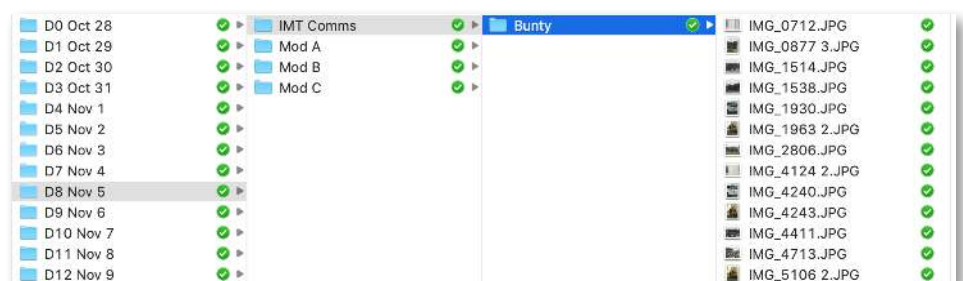
4—Learn Everyone's Name

This is a tough one, I know. Like most people, I am terrible at names. One of the perks of serving on the internal and external communication teams is that I handled everyone's paperwork before the TREX started. I felt like I knew everyone before they arrived, and I just had to put a face with the name. That made it a lot easier when I went to bug people about giving me photos and asking them to share their TREX story on camera for the video we were working on. Like any task, the more you can build those personal relationships, the better off you will be.

5—Take Care of Yourself

Oh man—I wish I had learned this one earlier. A little over halfway through the TREX, I took some time to go for a run. I can't overemphasize how much that short break revitalized me. It's easy to get caught up, say to yourself "it's just two weeks," and try to put everything on hold. The problem is, things don't actually go on hold. On day 12, my eyes welled up as I explained to one of my teammates that I was overwhelmed because as hard as I tried, I couldn't check out of my life and my family for that long. As soon as the words left my mouth, I realized that no one can do that. Because this person is an amazing friend and colleague, she listened, helped me organize my thoughts, and we got back to work.

I'm a big believer in time budgets, and I wish I had put one in place for myself during the TREX. Try to make a plan for each day and stick to it. Take time to post on social media, time to attend the necessary meetings, time to organize photos—and time to nourish yourself, whether it's with good food, a phone call home, or exercise. I could cite studies that show how productive we can be both from and during "downtime," but we all know it's true. How many times have you walked away from a problem



Intense, right? This is a screenshot from my photo storage system. Establishing a file storage system ahead of time, and then sticking to it, was essential in terms of retaining photographer information and other context for the thousands of photos that I collected over the two weeks.

that felt like a brick wall only to think of the solution when you're at the grocery store? It's true in this case as well. Take care of yourself and you'll be able to give more and get more out of an event like TREX, no matter what role you serve in.

It Worked

In the end, our crew of more than 50 prescribed fire practitioners conducted three burns, set the stage for 10 more burns by creating 5.5 miles of line, received great public feedback—and

our TREX was featured in nine articles. To see some of these communication wins, check out the links on our SBR TREX media page.



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Learn More

Partners

Consortium of Appalachian Fire Managers and Scientists

<http://www.appalachianfire.org/>

South Carolina Forestry Commission

<https://www.state.sc.us/forest/>

South Carolina State Parks

<https://southcarolinaparks.com/>

The Nature Conservancy

<https://www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/where-we-work/united-states/south-carolina/>

Related Work

Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges (Trex)

<http://nature.ly/trainingexchanges>

Southern Blue Ridge Fire Learning Network (SBR FLN)

<http://www.sbrfln.com>

<http://www.conservationgateway.org/ConservationPractices/FireLandscapes/FireLearningNetwork/RegionalNetworks/Pages/SBR.aspx>

Fire Learning Trail

<https://fireadaptednetwork.org/fire-learning-trail-interview-jenifer-bunty/>

Southern Blue Ridge TREX

Public Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/SBRTREX/>

Twitter feed: https://twitter.com/SBR_TREX

SBR TREX websites: <https://apfire.wixsite.com/sbrtrex2018>

Video: bit.ly/SBR_TREX_Story
"My Southern Blue Ridge TREX Story"

Communications Tools

Calendar template: bit.ly/SocialMediaCalendarTemplate2

Flickr (photo site): <http://www.flickr.com/>



FIRE ADAPTED COMMUNITIES LEARNING NETWORK

This story was originally published on the Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network (FAC Net) blog. FAC Net publishes blogs about community wildfire resilience weekly; visit fireadaptednetwork.org/subscribe to have stories like this delivered to your inbox.



bit.ly/TalkingAboutTREX

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The Fire Learning Network, Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network and Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges are part of *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 information about PERFACT, contact Marek Smith at marek_smith@tnc.org.

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