

15 Lessons Learned from 10 Years of Cooperative Burning

Notes from the Field

By Jeremy Bailey

When someone asks me “how can we have a TREX?” my mind instantly conjures up an image of a baseball field and the words “build it and they will come” float to the tip of my tongue. Sometimes I even say it. I know it’s not what project directors want to hear, but after coordinating 30 TREX events, and helping others coordinate and lead another 30, it feels like sound advice. I am continually surprised and inspired by how successful each two-week TREX is and how each event is able to draw such a diverse group of participants.

Many people love and respect fire, appreciate what it provides to their families and communities, and will show up and help if you give them the opportunity.

The principle of “neighbors helping neighbors” has been central to the success of TREX. The collaborative partnerships facilitated by Fire Learning Network and Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network members create the conditions that enable the program to be so successful. The following is a list of



An experienced wildland firefighter and prescribed fire practitioner, Jeremy Bailey works with dozens of partners to develop capacity for implementing prescribed fire.

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Jeremy Bailey joined the Fire Learning Network (The Nature Conservancy's North American team that works on integrated fire management strategies) in 2007. He currently leads the implementation of the Prescribed Fire Training Exchange (TREX; bit.ly/FLN_TREX) strategy. An experienced wildland firefighter and prescribed fire practitioner, Jeremy works with dozens of partners to develop capacity for implementing prescribed fire. His most recent efforts are focused on developing a network of coaches and leaders who will provide leadership and coordination to the two dozen TREX events currently planned.

observations, ideas, best practices and lessons learned related to TREX that pertain to controlled burning in general.

1. Make the use of fire a priority.

Don’t believe all the anti-burning hype. Yes, getting good fire on the ground takes grit and determination, but individuals, teams and programs who make prescribed fire a priority will accomplish their goals.

2. Manage liability; don’t run from it.

Use the tools agencies and attorneys have given us; learn about the agreements, permits, regulations

and waivers related to your project and work diligently to clarify and manage the roles and responsibilities of all of the cooperators.

3. Work with the media. Invite them to your burns and provide them with personal protective equipment, or better yet, provide them with basic firefighter safety training and embed them in your crews.

4. Have a clear story. Train your fire crews to carry your most important messages into the community.

5. Don’t try to stay under the radar. Don’t hide your burn program. Be bold; embrace the risk of controlled burning and work tirelessly to mitigate the risks. Engage the local community and start with small steps and demonstration burns. Then, grow your program in scale and scope, and celebrate the controlled burns that successfully protect communities, restore systems, or achieve other benefits.

6. Include air quality regulators early on. Collaborate with air quality regulators, or include them on your planning teams. Know, understand and work through your regulatory process. Do this earlier than you are accustomed to.



Firefighters from a variety of agencies, organizations and countries, taking notes during a prescribed fire briefing.

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7. **Develop a cross-trained workforce.** Even with a dedicated prescribed fire crew, additional staff are often needed on site during burns. Teach your other staff and volunteers how to assist during controlled burns and expect them to participate.
 8. **Invest in a dedicated prescribed fire crew during your burn season.** When employees are tasked with other priorities like suppression readiness, strategic planning or other and management duties, they are not able to accomplish the volume of burning they otherwise could.
 9. **Use volunteers.** They make just as good a fire practitioner as any professional. Develop relationships with neighbors.
 10. **Share your resources with others.** If you are expecting others to help you, you first need to help them. When your partner or neighbor asks for help on burn day, show up and help.
 11. **Recognize and integrate the role and knowledge of indigenous burners.** Many fire adapted ecosystems have been managed by Native Americans for centuries. Numerous tribes still retain traditional ecological knowledge that provides insight into appropriate burning seasons and the natural benefits of fire.
 12. **Don't cancel your burns prematurely.** Despite unfavorable forecasts, check your burn units and look for opportunities tucked into the margins. Not every day is going to be a perfect weather window for burning, but many days have good enough windows to get some effective burning accomplished.



This firefighter works on the TRES Incident Management Team and is responsible for ensuring the Incident Action Plan is ready each day. But, when she gets a few extra minutes, you'll see her out with the rest of crew getting good fire on the ground.

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13. **Windows are wider than most people believe.** Take steps to maximize burn windows, like burning in the mornings or evenings, just a few days after rain, or in non-traditional months.
 14. **Get involved with your Prescribed Fire Council.** Most states now have Prescribed Fire Councils, stakeholder groups composed of multiple organizations that work to enable safe and successful prescribed fire on private and public lands through policy work, capacity building, public engagement and other efforts.
 15. **Embrace your responsibility to use fire.** Lead or get out of the way. This is a revolution, and that requires that we shake free the bonds that tie us to failure and embrace a new order of business.
- I'm certain that the most important element of TRES is the diversity of hosts, planners and participants. I've seen it over and over again — when our TRES teams are challenged with difficult problems, it is the diversity of the team, with its depth and breadth, that provides the creative and experienced solutions.



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