

Working with Volunteer Fire Departments to Increase Ecologically Appropriate Fire in the U.S.: An Overview

DRAFT: March 16, 2009

Contact: Wendy Fulks, wfulks@tnc.org or Jeremy Bailey, jeremy_bailey@tnc.org

Controlled burning around the country for human and resource benefit has significant impacts and can also have serious consequences. In most areas around the country fire departments (volunteer, municipal, etc.) play some role. That role can include simply being notified about planned burns, issuing burn permits, having some limited resources on standby, as well as being fully integrated into the command and control organization of controlled burning operations. In some cases these fire departments may even lead burns as the senior agency. Regardless of local policy and procedures, the relationship between Nature Conservancy fire practitioners and local fire departments is critical.

The intent of this document is to identify and highlight current and potential opportunities and barriers for prescribed fire practitioners to work more successfully with local fire departments and similar entities (for simplicity hereafter referred to as volunteer fire departments, or VFDs) to increase ecologically appropriate fire and improve overall safety and effectiveness of community-based fire management.

In what situations would one want to work with VFDs, i.e. to encourage them to participate on or even lead controlled burns?

- In places where prescribed fire resources (especially staff and equipment) are limited and there are few other partners with which to work. VFD members are both potential volunteers and potential hires.
- In states where local fire chiefs (paid or volunteer) issue burn permits. Practitioners in these places are already cultivating relationships with these folks; they are de facto partners.
- In areas where VFD staff and officers are landowners and opinion leaders.
- If there is demand from private landowners for prescribed fire services, *and* the landowners aren't willing or able to do it themselves.
- If there is some funding available to offset prescribed fire costs, e.g., USDA-NRCS cost-share programs.
- If the VFD has equipment that can be used to enhance or expand fire operations.
- Where VFD support can increase political capital for implementing and funding prescribed fire and smoke management programs.

Additional benefits to working with VFDs

- Increase trust in Conservancy-led fire operations (among public and VFDs).
- Volunteers with local prescribed fire training and experience will have a better understanding of local fuel types, weather conditions, access, water sources, etc. and will, therefore, be better equipped to respond to wildfires.

- Volunteers with local prescribed fire experience often have a better understanding of ecosystem management goals and, therefore, may conduct wildland fire suppression work in a more environmentally sensitive way.
- Working with VFDs on prescribed fires can improve coordination on wildfires.
- VFDs can be a good bridge to other state and county resources during an escaped fire or wildfire incident.
- VFD members typically remain with the department for long periods of time.
- For VFDs that lead prescribed fires, the cost can be less than for mobile prescribed fire crews (lower overhead and transportation costs)

How does it work?

- Volunteer fire fighters are encouraged to take S-130/S-190. (**Crew participating on Nature Conservancy-led burns must meet NWCG training and qualification standards, or a program must have an MOU with the VFD that specifically states a program accepts their training standards.**) It's also important to arrange the class schedule to fit with the volunteers' schedules (likely evening or weekend, since most have regular jobs). One can also utilize the cross-walk course,¹ which saves some duplication and time.
- Individual volunteers then either help the Conservancy or others burn (as volunteers or as paid staff), or departments do their own marketing to landowners.

If VFDs take the lead:

- Landowners do most of the site preparation.
- Burn plans are written by a knowledgeable volunteer, or by USDA-NRCS or state agency.
- The equipment comes from regional caches, or the VFD writes grants to buy its own equipment or gets excess equipment from the state or Government Accountability Office (GAO).
- Landowners make "donations" based on guidelines, including the acreage burned.
- Liability issues need to be worked out.
- Small departments can pair up to conduct burns.

Barriers to working with VFDs

- A contingency plan is needed to ensure unrelated fires and other incidents that happen during prescribed fires are covered. Otherwise, VFD members will be unwilling or unable to commit to help when on duty. (Good planning and mutual aid agreements help.)

¹ The Skills Crosswalk is the easiest way to get volunteer firefighters certified in wildland firefighting. NWCG, FEMA and NFPA have cooperated to create a series of courses designed to train structural firefighters in the necessary wildland firefighting skills in an abbreviated course. This was done by comparing position task books of structural and wildland firefighter, and eliminating the redundancies. The result is called the Skills Crosswalk, and is available for the basic Wildland Firefighter 2 through Strike Team Leader. The standard S-130/190 is typically a 67.5 hour curriculum, but the skills crosswalk version is shortened to only 21 hours. Much of the course can be completed online, but a classroom and field demo section is required for NWCG approval. The online courses are free, and the costs of materials are typically about \$20/student for the classroom section. (NWCG. 2008. *Skills Crosswalk*)

- Volunteers may not be able to assist as members of the VFD outside of their district.
- VFD members already have a lot of mandated training and response hours for structural, medical and other fire specialties. Prescribed fire training and participation is usually an addition that may be difficult to balance.
- Some fire chiefs are not supportive no matter what.
- Similarly, some VFDs discourage involvement in wildland fire and/or consider prescribed fire as outside the purview of VFDs.
- Leadership within VFDs (both chiefs and commissioners) can change frequently. After a few years of making progress with one set of leaders, the process may need to be started again with the next until a prescribed fire culture within the department is developed.
- Most volunteer firefighters have full-time jobs and may only be available on weekends or in the evening. This limits the kinds of burns they can participate in.

What's in it for the VFDs?

- A way to get younger people interested in joining their VFD and to *keep* them active and interested.
- Potential employment opportunities if they obtain NCWG qualifications.
- Fun, camaraderie.
- Training, experience and insights to help VFD members fight wildfires (e.g., experience in different fuel types, new tactics, power saws, off road driving).
- Potential reciprocal help (from a partner such as the Conservancy) with wildland and even structural fire responses (example from South Dakota).

If the VFDs lead their own burns:

- They will have confidence in the people leading the burn because it's them! In other words, they won't have to worry about "cleaning up" someone else's mess.
- A way to raise funds for their department.

Tips for engaging VFDs

- Establish trust with local VFD chief and commissioners.
- Bring them into the planning and communication process early on.
- Make them aware of what's in it for them (see above).
- Offer training (might have to do it on weekends).
- If there is a system used to track VFD member participation, ensure that volunteers receive "credit" for participating on prescribed fires.
- Provide opportunities for interested VFD members to participate on fire lines with experienced prescribed fire crews.
- Provide equipment or help with equipment grant writing.
- Create employment opportunities.
- Have a prescribed fire advocate join the local VFD.
- Integrate all prescribed fires, trainings and drills into the VFD communication channels (i.e. radio announcements and department calendars).
- Hold a recognition event in honor of VFD's support. Provide them with positive media opportunities.