



Fire Learning Network Notes from the Field

State Line Burn: Collaboration Across the Border of North and South Carolina

Southern Blue Ridge Escarpment FLN
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An Interview with Brian Browning by Cynthia Fowler and Kaycia Best

Brian Browning is the fire management officer for the Nantahala Ranger District of the Nantahala National Forest. Cynthia Fowler is a professor of anthropology and the chair of the Sociology and Anthropology Department at Wofford College in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Kaycia Best is a student at Wofford College, double majoring in sociology-anthropology and biology.

Conducting a controlled burn across national forest boundaries and state lines requires cooperation and a well-oiled team of fire managers. The multiagency team that conducted the State Line Burn had the esprit de corps to successfully implement a prescribed fire in the mountainous terrain of the Nantahala Ranger District in North Carolina's Nantahala National Forest and the Andrew Pickens Ranger District in South Carolina's Sumter National Forest. The 1,762-acre burn included 956 acres in North Carolina and 806 acres in South Carolina. We spoke with burn boss Brian Browning about what made it work.

What stands out about the State Line Burn?

What is unique about this burn is that it crossed boundaries. Our team in the Nantahala district in North Carolina and our friends in the Andrew Pickens in South Carolina were looking for opportunities where we logically could do a prescribed burn. Between our districts, we found a piece of property where there is a state line but no break in national forest lands.

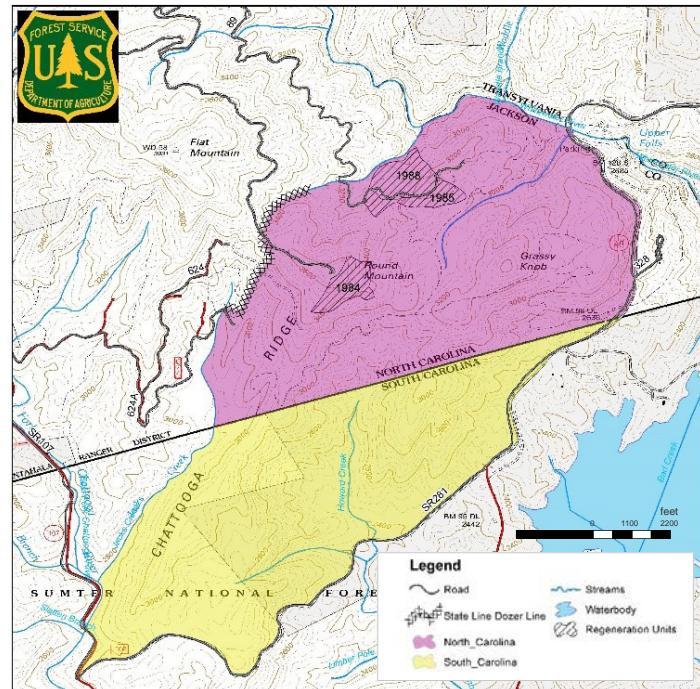
Why did you choose this location to burn?

When you look at the topography, at the other features that are there on the ground, it was a fairly large area, what we'd consider a landscape burn. Most of what we used for containment was either state road or water—creeks or a river. So it didn't take adding very much containment line at all. The less containment line that we can get by with, the better. So it really stood out as a large area that we could burn with minimal effort.

What's the process of choosing where to burn?

I spend a lot of time looking at maps and looking on the ground to figure out if this is an area that we have the control lines to keep it contained. Once you know that it's an area that you want to burn, you ask, Can we keep it in this area and not let it get loose? Can we feasibly construct control lines if they are not already in place? Can we get the resources to do it?

Once you have an idea of where you'd like your control lines to be, then you submit that map and then your specialists—your archaeologist, your botanist, your wildlife person, and all those people—are going to look at it and make sure there are no issues from their standpoint. For example, talking with



the botanist about this as a good area, we asked, Do you feel comfortable with fire being in this area? You have those yellow pine species in that area—that's typically a pretty good indicator that fire would be a welcome thing there.

We here at the Nantahala district have worked with the Andrew Pickens district for years, too. We've helped to do their prescribed burns and they've helped us out a lot over the past years. Having that relationship already was key. It wasn't difficult for us to come together on the day of the burn because we were used to working together.

I've been here for 17 years and what we called the Tri-State Agreement was in place then (it's not called that anymore). It was an agreement between the three districts—the Andrew Pickens in South Carolina, what's now the Chattooga River district in Georgia and the Nantahala in North Carolina. The districts share boundaries where the states come together. The agreement was a way to get the districts talking about wildfires and prescribed burning. It makes it easier to share resources across district and state boundaries. We've helped both those districts with wildfire and prescribed burning, and vice versa.

And when we were talking about burning this unit, Wes Bentley became the assistant fire management officer in the Andrew Pickens district, transferring from the Chattooga River district in

the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest. I've worked with Wes for years. That made accomplishing the burn a little easier.

Tell us about the process for planning and preparing the burn.

Both forests came together and ensured that we were comfortable with the process and exactly how we were going to work through it. The planning included making sure our control lines were going to be viable on both sides, on both forests, and working on who would be in what position on the day of the burn; and how we would work that.

At first we planned on doing one NEPA document. But we decided it would be easier for each forest to do their own. So we had to wait until both forests completed the NEPA process.

Another key part of planning was making sure that we had good communications. Some of the communications details we didn't really iron out very well, honestly, until the day of the burn when we realized, Hey what we are planning isn't going to work. It was kind of rough there for a minute to figure that out.

Another big communication thing was what dispatch we were going to use. Because it was a helicopter burn, and the Andrew Pickens people had requested the helicopter, we ran all of our communications out of the Columbia dispatch for the Andrew Pickens. I was talking with my dispatch center in Asheville as well. But if we had had an emergency and had to request something, it would have been out of the Columbia dispatch.

In a burn plan, we state what resources we will need for the burn. So we just worked together between the two districts to ensure that we had all of the resources that we felt like we would need to be successful.

Did you have one burn plan, or two?

That was one of the first things that we talked about: Do we do two separate burn plans, or just one? There were a few things due to different agreements in North Carolina and South Carolina—air quality and stuff like that—and some standalone things in the burn plan specific to each national forest. But we just did one burn plan. I wrote it, then Wes [Bentley, from the Andrew Pickens district] did the technical review. And we got the district rangers and specialists—the botanists, wildlife biologists, fisheries biologists, silviculturalists, archaeologists, recreation assistants—from both of the forests sign the one burn plan.

Who was on the burn?

We had a trainee burn boss and we wanted to let him run the burn, so I worked with him in that capacity. We originally talked about Wes being the firing boss. Then we decided that the best thing he could do, since he had the same qualifications as I did, was to not have him in an official role, but just kind of hold back and monitor the burn.

We had four of our Type 6 engines—two off of the Nantahala district, one off of Andrew Pickens district, and we brought one in from the Tusquitee Ranger District here in North Carolina.

Primarily their job was to patrol the highways, because we used a lot of state highways for containment lines, and to burn off or clean up any edges at the end of the burn. We had a few people in pickup trucks that could patrol the control lines on the state roads, helping the engines patrol. We also had a bulldozer, to contain the fire in case something did go wrong.

We had one section of dozer line where we used a hand crew that fired off a section of dozer line, and then they held that

dozer line to make sure it wasn't going to go anywhere. And we had a firing boss in the helicopter. That person directed where the helicopter was going and firing. And we had one guy that hung out at Round Mountain, which was the high point of the burn unit, where he could keep an eye on the helicopter and make sure everything was going good with it.

We also tried hard not to have just South Carolina people working with South Carolina people. Like I said, it's not a big deal for us to come and just mix everybody together and be able to work well together. That's exactly the way we did it.

How did topography come into play here?

When you are burning in the mountains, most of our fire is terrain driven instead of wind driven. In the eastern part of the state, you'd be more concerned with the wind as far as your firing patterns go. In the mountains our firing pattern is going to be based on the terrain. Not that you don't pay attention to the wind—because you absolutely do—but for the most part, your fire pattern is going to be terrain influenced.

This wasn't a stand replacement burn. It was a fuels reduction burn, so we didn't want it to burn real hot. We wanted it to clean up those ground fuels. So lighting from the highest elevation, and letting it burn down is typically how we do that.

Sometimes our exact pattern is determined on the day of the burn. The weather plays into that: What kind of fire behavior you are seeing? And what type of resources are you using? We were using a helicopter on this, so it was pretty easy for him to start at the highest elevations and work his way down the mountain. Then, depending on your fire activity, you can change how you're firing with that helicopter real easy. If it's burning too hot, you can either narrow your strips up or you can fire your ridgetops and let your fire back off. If it's not burning with enough intensity, you can widen your strips and then let that fire have a little more distance to run. You have to be pretty flexible with it and be paying attention. That's where having someone—a firing boss in that helicopter that has some experience—really pays off because they'll know when they need to adjust their pattern to get the results you're looking for.

Do you have any lessons learned or advice you want to share?

Through that planning process, it doesn't hurt to get into the smallest details and talk those out between the districts or whoever the cooperators are that will be working together. Get into the weeds and make sure you are talking about those smallest details before the day of the burn.

I mentioned some of the communications stuff. All of a sudden there, in the briefing the day of the burn, we realized that there was a communications issue that we had not worked out yet. Just really make sure you look at even those minute details and make sure that you have talked your way through that to make sure there is as little confusion as possible.

For more on the Southern Blue Ridge regional FLN, visit
<http://www.sbrfln.com>

The Fire Learning Network is 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 PERFECT, contact Marek Smith at marek_smith@tnc.org.

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