



CONSORTIUM OF APPALACHIAN FIRE MANAGERS AND SCIENTISTS

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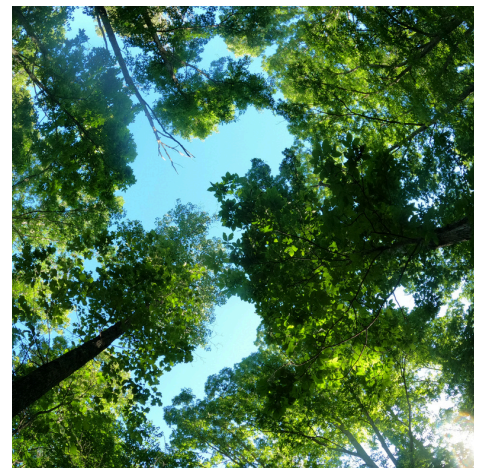
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Southern Blue Ridge Fire Learning Network

The Southern Blue Ridge Fire Learning Network (SBR FLN)
celebrated 20 years

The SBR FLN has grown its collaborative partnerships
covering 8 geographic landscapes



Table Rock Reservoir with view of Table
Rock Complex and Pinnacle Mountain
Wildfires. Photo by Lindsey Hosier

20 Years of the Southern Blue Ridge FLN



Burn unit with Hurricane Helene damage. Photo by Lindsey Hosier

The Southern Blue Ridge Fire Learning Network was established in 2006. Managers, practitioners, and scientists saw the need to collaboratively share research, and to facilitate conversations around the implementation of good fire on the landscape. The first SBR FLN meeting was held in Asheville, NC with the meeting goal to, “Jointly develop goals for the landscape, describe and model how major forest types of interest (pine-oak-heath, mesic oak, northern red oak and pitch pine/table mountain pine) respond to fire.” Today, it has grown to consist of multiple agencies that span across 8 geographical landscapes and jurisdictions, with the same intention of putting good fire on the landscape.



Attendees tour a burn unit. Photo by Lindsey Hosier

The goal of this year’s meeting was to reflect upon the inception of the SBR FLN and to discuss post Hurricane Helene fuels. It was hosted at the [Table Rock Camp and Retreat Center](#) in Pickens, SC. One hundred twenty individuals attended the workshop, representing multiple states and agencies. For the presentation and field trip portion, 28 speakers presented on topics related to the future of the SBR FLN, Hurricane Helene fuels, Helene wind damage, forest structure and composition, Community Wildfire Protection Plans, and Helene overstory mortality. CAFMS Co-PI, Jean Lorber, Forest Ecologist with The Nature Conservancy Virginia, presented, “Tracking Helene’s Impacts on Fire Operations: Year 2”. You can find Jean’s presentation and all other speaker presentations on the [CAFMS YouTube channel](#).



Attendees of the 2026 SBR FLN annual meeting



8th Fire in Eastern Oak Forests Conference

The 8th Fire in Eastern Oak Forests Conference was held in Bloomington, Indiana

Featured 22 presentations, 12 “flash talks”, and 24 poster presentations

Field tour was hosted by the Hardwood Ecosystem Experiment and The Nature Conservancy Indiana



“Re-Igniting Fire Ecosystems and Cultures”

Advancing the Conversation on Fire Science and Culture

The Fire in Eastern Oak Forests Conference is the largest and longest running conference dedicated to the management of oak forests in the eastern U.S., and is a catalyst for innovative research. The first conference was held in Richmond, Kentucky in 2000. Over the years, these conferences have continued to underscore a unified commitment to advancing the management of oak-dominated and fire adapted ecosystems with fire. The 8th Fire in Eastern Oak Forests Conference took place in Bloomington, Indiana June 2-4, 2026, focused on the theme, “Re-Igniting Fire Ecosystems and Cultures”. Co-organizers included the [Oak Woodlands & Forests Fire Consortium](#), [Consortium of Appalachian Fire Managers and Scientists](#), and local partners that included the [Sam Shine Foundation](#), [Purdue University – Forestry and Natural Resources](#), and [The Nature Conservancy Indiana](#).

The conference featured 22 presentations, 12 flash talks, and 24 poster presentations, connecting approximately 200 attendees to impactful research. Achievement Awards were presented, honoring significant contributions across science, management, education and outreach, and training. CAFMS board member, Dr. Heather D. Alexander, Professor of Forest and Fire Ecology and the Dwain G. Luce Endowed Professor of Forestry in the College of Forestry, Wildlife, and Environment at Auburn University, received this prestigious award honoring her hard work and dedication to fire research. Congratulations to Heather, and all the other recipients, on receiving an outstanding award for their dedication to innovation and leadership.

The field trip portion of the conference visited the Wallow Hollow burn unit, which is owned and managed by The Nature Conservancy Indiana. For the past 10 years, TNC foresters have thinned the midstory and treated it with prescribed fire with the intent of creating an open structure for the benefit of open canopy songbirds and to enhance oak recruitment. Attendees also visited the Hardwood Ecosystem Experiment (HEE), which is a long-term research initiative consisting of 9 management units. HEE is dedicated to understanding the ecological and social impacts of forest management and the scientific study and implementation of prescribed fire in Indiana’s Central Hardwood Region.



Jarred Brooks, Purdue University. Photo by Joe Marschall



Dr Heather D. Alexander. Photo by Joe Marschall



Hardwood Ecosystem Experiment. Photo by Lindsey Hosier



Field trip attendees at Wallow Hollow. Photo by Joe Marschall

Fire Research in the Appalachian Region

Dr. Adam Coates, CAFMS PI and Associate Professor in the Department of Forest Resources and Environmental Conservation in Virginia Tech's College of Natural Resources and Environment, is leading this \$3 million project

18 month grant from the U.S. Department of Defense's Environmental Security Technology Certification Program

Use of TLS, 3D fuels characterization, to model fire behavior and fuels in hardwood-dominated forests of the Appalachian region



Prescribed fire burning in leaf litter. Photo by Lindsey Hosier

Understanding Fire Behavior and Fuels in the Appalachian Region

Managers actively desire rapid assessment tools that can provide a better understanding of how fuel load and conditions affect wildfire behavior. Over the last decade, terrestrial laser scanning (TLS) and fire-atmosphere tools, such as QUIC-Fire, have enhanced the ability to identify, characterize, and quantify 3D assessments of vegetation and fuels. Together, these tools provide a deeper understanding of the complex and dynamic behavior of wildfires. Yet, hardwood-dominated ecosystems of the eastern United States have been lacking the effective and accurate use of these tools.

The increase in wildfire activity, increased use of prescribed fire, and large scale disturbance events necessitates the need for managers and practitioners to have these tools evaluated and adapted for hardwood-dominated ecosystems of the eastern United States. Dr. Adam Coates, CAFMS PI and Associate Professor in the Department of Forest Resources and Environmental Conservation in Virginia Tech's College of Natural Resources and Environment, responded to this need. With the assistance and support from Virginia Tech staff and other agencies, Dr. Coates secured and will lead this \$3 million project, funded for 18 months by the U.S. Department of Defense's Environmental Security Technology Certification Program. The intent of this project is to evaluate and validate TLS, UAS Structure from Motion (SfM), and LiDAR in eastern hardwood ecosystems, while also integrating these data into QUIC-Fire. This project will work to improve the efficiency of these tools in order to accurately assess fuels, biomass, storm damage, and habitat conditions, and integrate this data using QUIC-Fire to provide more accurate modeling of wildfire spread, fire intensity, and prescribed fire outcomes.

The project will be a joint effort of permanent staff, postdoctoral associates, graduate students, and undergraduate students from multiple universities and agencies. CAFMS, working alongside the Eastern Innovation Landscape Network (ELIN), will help to develop a co-production plan that will involve managers and practitioners throughout the duration of this project. CAFMS will also work to disseminate fuel guides and other outcomes that emerge from this work.

Key Partners

- CAFMS
- Colorado State University
- Ohio State University
- Old Dominion University
- The Nature Conservancy Virginia
- United States Forest Service
- United States Geological Survey
- Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
- William and Mary



Crew members planning for interior operations.
Photo by Lindsey Hosier



Post burn fire effects.
Photo by Lindsey Hosier



Crew members planning for interior operations.
Photo by Lindsey Hosier

APPALACHIAN SPOTLIGHT



MELISSA THOMAS-VAN GUNDY

REFLECTING ON 35 YEARS: FROM EXPLORER SCOUT TO RESEARCH FORESTER

The Appalachian region is a global biodiversity hotspot, with its ecological richness mirrored by a diverse community of stewards. CAFMS's footprint spans much of the Appalachian region, providing the opportunity to collaboratively work with many managers and scientists. In this newsletter, we highlight Melissa Thomas-Van Gundy and her successful career in research.



Melissa Thomas - Van Gundy

Q: What is your title and what agency do you work for? How long have you been with the agency?

A: Currently, I am a Research Forester and Project Leader with the USDA Forest Service Northern Research Station. I have been project leader since 2022 and research forester since 2006. Before that I was on the Monongahela National Forest as an ecologist and forester. I was required to obtain a PhD for the research position, which I did starting at age 40. I have been with the agency for 36 years and my whole career has been in West Virginia.

Q: How did you get into this career field?

A: I loved the woods as a kid. I grew up in eastern Pennsylvania in a mainly agricultural landscape. I joined an Explorer Scout troop at age 15 and we went on camping and canoeing trips, and sold firewood. The wood came from a woodlot that protected the town's back-up water supply. Spongy moths had hit hard in the 1980s, so the grownups felled the dead oaks and we scouts rolled the chunks to the hydraulic wood splitter. That's what I thought forestry was. Around this time, I started visiting West Virginia for caving trips with my high school science teacher and other students. On one of those trips, we stopped at the Monongahela National Forest supervisors office to buy topo maps before heading into the forest to camp and cave. After that trip, I decided I'd be a forester on the Monongahela National Forest.

Q: What do you enjoy most about your work? What are you currently working on?

A: I enjoy the applied and generally long-term nature of my

research. Blame it on my upbringing by born-and-raised-on-farms parents, but one value I hold is usefulness or utility, and I think Forest Service research is rooted in utility. Currently, I am interpreting the results from nearly 70 years of applying 3 harvest practices to mesic hardwood stands on the Fernow Experimental

Forest in West Virginia. This study has no end date and is focused on long-term sustainability of timber yields and change in overstory tree species composition.

Q: What is the biggest challenge you face in your line of work?

A: In my second-half career as a research scientist, I'd say the biggest challenge is getting our results to the right people.

We are expected to publish our work in scientific journals with high impact factors, however most land managers likely don't have the time to search the scientific literature. Researchers need to take the time to publish or synthesize their work in ways that allow for management recommendations to be implemented. This takes time and is not always rewarded in the evaluation of an individual scientists' work. This is also a good example of the value of networks like CAFMS.

Q: What is the most valuable lesson you have learned? Is there something you have learned that has taken you by surprise?

A: Thinking about my experiences in fire, I'd say one valuable lesson I've learned is how to work with others. All clichés aside, almost all of our work, either managing or studying forests and grasslands, is made better by working with others. It's been way too long since I've been on a 20-person hand crew, but each day with a crew is a lesson in team work, inter-personal dynamics,

"After that trip, I decided I'd be a forester on the Monongahela National Forest."

leadership, and fire behavior. Surprises have included - watching a burning hollow chestnut oak tree become a chimney and “fling” embers across our fire line, that running buffalo clover (a rare plant) requires fairly intense disturbance to persist on a site, and that red spruce in West Virginia is recovering from the industrial logging era.

Q: What advice would you offer someone entering into this field?

A: Stay curious, ask questions, take a GIS class or three.

Q: What has been the most rewarding moment?

A: Thinking of fire again, I’d say creating my first approximation of fire regimes for the Monongahela National Forest. It



Melissa Thomas - Van Gundy on a fire in Idaho in 2012

wasn’t perfect, but it helped frame fire ecology, and the potential for prescribed fire on the Monongahela during revision of the Forest Plan. It ended up being my first publication as a researcher.

Q: Outside of work, what do you enjoy doing with your time?

A: I’ve been trying some creative writing. After 20 years of having to make sure what I say is backed up by data or previous research, it’s fun to flex my imagination.

Conferences



Northeast - Midwest Prescribed Fire Science and Management Workshop

July 21 - 23, 2026

Blended Learning Excursion

Building on the success of last year’s program, we are excited to once again offer the Blended Learning Excursion in 2026. This three-day experience combines the flexibility of virtual learning with the richness of in-person field opportunities across the Northeast and Midwest. Day One will feature a half day of virtual presentations, Day Two will be in-person field trips hosted independently across the Northeast-Midwest by willing participants; or bonus Virtual Presentations, and Day Three, we will continue with a half day of virtual presentations showcasing representatives from across the 20 States Region.

For more information visit the [event website](#).

Eastern Native Grasslands Symposium

October 13 - 16, 2026

Hopkinsville, KY



The Eastern Native Grasslands Symposium is a biennial gathering made possible by the growing interest and collaboration of a diverse community dedicated to native grasses, forbs, and wetland plants of the eastern United States. This community includes restorationists, landscape architects, ecologists, landowners, forage producers, biologists, wildlife and pollinator enthusiasts, private consultants, government agencies, seed and plant producers, and many others.

For more information visit the [Eastern Native Grasslands website](#).



SAF National Convention

October 6 - 9, 2026

Tacoma, WA

SAF Annual National Convention will be hosted in Tacoma, WA, with the theme, "Rooted Future: Growing in a Dynamic World." This event will bring together foresters, researchers, and policymakers to reflect on the rich history of forestry, share current advancements, and look ahead to the future of sustainable forest management.

For more information visit the [event website](#).

15th Biennial Longleaf Conference

October 25-29, 2026

Willamsburg, VA



The Biennial Longleaf Conference, sponsored by [The Longleaf Alliance](#), is a regional conference that is focused on the restoration and conservation of the longleaf ecosystem that once dominated the landscape within the southeastern United States. The conference provides the opportunity for people from all over the southeast to get together, share, learn, and celebrate longleaf. It also serves as a rallying spot for several other organizations and government agencies seeking to stage additional events in order to better collaborate on the conference topics.

For more information visit the [Longleaf Alliance website](#).



10th International Conference on Forest Fire Research & 19th International Wildland Fire Safety Summit

October 31 - November 6, 2026

Coimbra, Portugal

ICFFR presents itself as an opportunity to meet people and institutions, to promote international cooperation in this research and management area. In November 2026, the 10th edition of the Conference will once again be held in Coimbra, and again in conjunction with the International Wildland Fire Safety Summit, an initiative of the International Association of Wildland Fire. In all its editions, several related events have been promoted: short-courses, workshops, seminars, meetings, technology dissemination forums, etc.

For more information visit the [event website](#).

Beneficial Fire Summit

December 7 - 11, 2026

Mission Bay San Diego, CA



This event aims to bring together practitioners, researchers, community members, Tribes, agencies, NGOs, PBAs, and others to celebrate recent progress, share insights and ideas, and advance our collective work in beneficial fire. The program will focus on all three components of beneficial fire—prescribed fire, cultural fire, and managed wildfire—in California and across the West. We hope to create an engaging, productive space, with workshops, field tours, focused sessions, and plenty of time for networking and connection. This event is a collaboration with the Association for Fire Ecology, UC ANR Fire Network, California Fire Science Consortium, Northern California Prescribed Fire Council, Tall Timbers Research Station, and University of Nevada Extension/Living With Fire.

For more information visit the [event website](#).



Jobs

- The Nature Conservancy is hiring Ecological Forester/Certification Coordinator - [Application](#)
- The Nature Conservancy Asheville, NC is hiring Forest Recovery Senior Crew Member - [Application](#)
- The Nature Conservancy North Carolina is hiring a Forest Conservation Technician - [Application](#)
- The Nature Conservancy North America Fire Program is hiring for its Prescribed Fire Modules program - [Application](#)
- The Nature Conservancy Atlanta, Georgia is hiring Ecological Forester/Certification Coordinator - [Application](#)
- North Carolina State Parks is hiring Prescribed Fire Crew Technician (Mountain Region) - [Information](#)
- The Ember Alliance is hiring Uwharrie National Forest Prescribed Fire/Fuels Permanent Crew Member - [Application](#)
- The Ember Alliance is hiring Greenville, South Carolina Fuels Monitoring Module Crewmember, Field Tech - [Application](#)

Trainings

- Selkirk TREX - Loon Lake, WA - [Application](#)
- Pennsylvania Certified Prescribed Burn Managers Course - [Details](#)
- North Carolina Certified Burner Class offered by the NCFS - [Details](#)

Webinars

- University of Wisconsin Steven's Point: Restoring Fire's Role in Ecosystem Health: A Prescribed Fire Case Study in Barrens and Biodiversity - [Registration](#)
- University of Wisconsin Steven's Point: Adaptation in Action: Sustaining Fundamental Ecological Function - [Registration](#)
- University of Wisconsin Steven's Point: Oak Wilt Biology and Management - [Registration](#)
- Southern Fire Exchange: Wildland Fire Entrainment - Should the Fire Triangle be Square? - [Registration](#)

Resources

- Federal Wildland Firefighter Health and Wellbeing Program - [Information](#)
- Joint Fire Science Program's Fiscal Years 2024 and 2025 [Progress Report](#)
- A Year of Partnership: The Fire Science Exchange Network [Storymap](#)
- North Carolina Prescribed Fire Council Meeting - [Information](#)

Research

- Byers, A.C., Thomas-Van Gundy, M.A., Medlock, K., Shallows, K.M. (2026). History and Accomplishments of Red Spruce Restoration Initiatives Across the Central and Southern Appalachians. In: Brown, D.J., Thomas-Van Gundy, M.A., Diggins, C.A., Silvis, A., Shallows, K.M. (eds) Ecology and Restoration of Red Spruce Ecosystems in the Central and Southern Appalachians. *Springer, Cham*. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-19616-3_9
- Cumberland, Ruth. (2026). "Forest Overstory Mortality & Recruitment Patterns Eight Years Following Wildfire in the Southern Appalachians" (2026). *All Theses*. 4753. https://open.clemson.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5762&context=all_theses
- Harris, C. (2026). Fuels of the Southern Appalachian Fire and Fire Surrogate Study following Hurricane Helene and the Black Cove Wildfire Complex (Master's thesis, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University). *Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Forest Resources and Environmental Conservation*. <https://hdl.handle.net/10919/143112>
- Knapp, B.O., Fraser, J., Baggs, J. et al. (2026). Shortleaf Pine (*Pinus echinata*): Management Challenges, Knowledge Gaps, and Opportunities for an Unsung Species. *Journal of Forestry*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44392-026-00084-x>
- Michel, J. T., Evans, J. P. (2026). Vegetative Regeneration Delays but Does Not Prevent Regeneration Debt: Thirty Years of Compositional and Structural Change in Adjacent Appalachian Forest Communities. *Forests*, 17(5), 520. <https://doi.org/10.3390/f17050520>
- Snyder MD, Coates TA, Possinger AR, Haak DC, Oishi AC, Caldwell PV, Aylward FO and Barrett JE. (2026). Taxonomic and multifunctional response of soil microbial communities to wildfire, prescribed fire, and partial harvesting in the Southern Appalachian Mountains, United States. *Frontiers in Forests and Global Change*. 9:1694825. doi: [10.3389/ffgc.2026.1694825](https://doi.org/10.3389/ffgc.2026.1694825)



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Find us on YouTube: [Appalachian Fire - CAFMS](#)

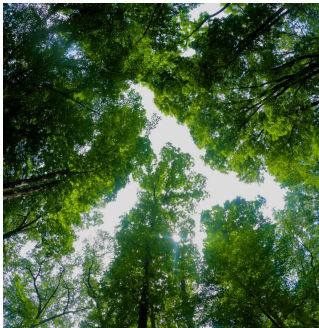
Website: www.appalachianfire.org



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A Member of the JFSP
Fire Science Exchange Network

