

VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENTS: TURNING FIRE FIGHTERS INTO FIRE STARTERS

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Abstract: Restoring fire to the Great-Plains is of critical importance. After more than a century of fire exclusion, ecosystem changes are negatively affecting economic, conservation, and functional values. Throughout the plains, people are seeking solutions to challenges of restoring fire at scale in a mostly privately owned landscape. One of the biggest barriers is the lack of experienced fire practitioners. The Nature Conservancy and partners in the Loess Hills of western Iowa have tried for years, with limited success, to spark development of landowner-led burn cooperatives, a strategy that has worked successfully in parts of Texas, Oklahoma and Nebraska. The large number of small communities in the Loess Hills offers another approach: volunteer fire department burn cooperatives, in which VFD's are planning and leading burns in their communities. Building off of the success of the Smithland (IA) volunteer fire department, VFD's as "fire starters" appears to be a model with sticking power. Volunteer firefighters already have experience with grassland fires; they live locally, understand the local conditions, and are trusted by the local community. Thus far the approach appears to be a win-win. VFD's are gaining valuable non-emergency training, are generating a welcomed source of revenue, and are attracting younger members to their departments. Conservationists are gaining trusted advocates for prescribed fire as well as building a sustainable network of local fire practitioners. Four active Loess Hills VFD's burned over 1000 acres in 2009 alone. With 34 fire districts in the Loess Hills the potential for landscape scale change is significant.