



# Putting Good Fire On The Ground Rio Trampas TRES





# RIO TRAMPAS TRAINING EXCHANGE

## Faces of Fire

Images and words by  
Esmé Cudiente Photography



We are firefighters. We are mothers, brothers, sisters and fathers. We are scientists, machine workers, engineers, photographers, massage therapists, volunteers, and lovers of the outdoors. We come together to protect and restore the lands we love.



### Putting Good Fire on the Ground in Northern New Mexico

A collaborative prescribed burn brings together wildland firefighters in building ecosystem resilience.

The forests and woodlands of northern New Mexico are a mosaic of landownership, with tribal and state trust parcels abutting Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management land, interspersed with privately owned tracts. Given this geographic patchwork, ecological management that moves beyond piecemeal treatment to address resilience at a landscape scale must necessarily be collaborative.

This October, the New Mexico State Land Office, the Bureau of Land Management, the Forest Stewards Guild and The Nature Conservancy's Fire Learning Network orchestrated just such a management action, bringing together a multi-partner team for a Prescribed Fire Training Exchange (or TREX) in the Rio Trampas watershed. Two principal objectives of the prescribed fire were to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire reaching 4 adjacent local communities and 1 Pueblo, and to lay the groundwork for an eventual return to a frequent, low- to moderate-intensity wildfire regime.

Prior to burning, the Rio Trampas Collaborative Forest Restoration Program project implemented a range of thinning prescriptions based on factors such as steepness of slope, aspect, erosivity, fuel load, and type of natural disturbance likely to occur there.



Top: TREX participants use a strip lighting technique to build heat and raise the crown height in a ponderosa pine stand. Photo: Sam Berry

Bottom: Matt Piccarello of the Forest Stewards Guild leads a tour of the burn units with local landowners. Photo: John Denne





**"We come together to protect communities from wildfire, promote healthy forests, and restore ecological integrity."**

- Esmé Cadiente,  
Forest Stewards Guild



**Top:** One of the understory ponderosa burns on BLM managed land.  
**Bottom:** Burning begins in the patch cuts that simulate lightning fires. The crew worked from the top of the hill downslope.  
Photos: Matt Piccarello

**Sidebars:** Faces of fire.  
Photos: Esmé Cadiente

The burn operations varied from unit to unit as a result of the diversity of restoration treatment. Burn units varied from ponderosa pine maintenance broadcast burns, to slash-generated pile burns on steep slopes. Two of the burn units were maintenance burns that had been burned 7 years ago. With each subsequent burn the fuel load on the landscape is lighter, less smoke is generated, and the landscape will be left more resilient in the face of future wildfires. For several days, the TREX team worked to burn piles of slash left from a thinning treatment reaching from a saddle down a long north-facing slope to a draw, freeing the site of the piles of accumulated woody material. On a nearby steep, south-facing slope, a broadcast burn on a series of patch cuts thinned with jackstraw slash represented the final step in a treatment meant to mimic lightning strikes.

All told, the Rio Trampas TREX contributed to putting fire on 160 acres of New Mexico state trust and BLM land. Simultaneously, the implementation of the burn provided a venue for each participant to build wildland firefighting and leadership qualifications. Just as important were the connections forged across agency and organizational lines. After fifteen days of working together on the fire line, navigating steep and rocky terrain, spending long days on the mountain—often past nightfall—and taking part in an environment of mutual learning and training, the camaraderie was palpable. Now, back at our respective organizations and long after the persistent smell of wood smoke fades from our field gear, we will continue to build upon the partnerships formed at Rio Trampas on the common ground of wildland firefighting, forest management, and building resilience in the landscape.

*by Leonora Pepper*



Long hours, heavy packs, arduous work, breathing smoke and weeks away from loved ones will eventually wear you down; but we maintain crew moral by building a reliance on one another, trading snacks, and telling stories in the field.



The camaraderie we build amongst squads carries us through the hard work to accomplish our goals for our forests and communities.



*This effort would not have been possible without*

## **OUR COLLABORATIVE BURN PARTNERS:**

**Back photo:** Burning within a patch cut to simulate a lightning strike ignition fire in a piñon-juniper woodland. Photo: Sam Berry

**Cover Photos:** Finishing up the last of the day's pile burning as dusk settles and portraits. Photo: Esmé Cadiente

Taos Field Office of the BLM, New Mexico State Land Office, US Forest Service, The Nature Conservancy's Fire Learning Network, Bandelier National Monument, Pueblo of Picuris, Pueblo of Tesuque, New Mexico State Forestry Returning Heroes Program, New Mexico Game and Fish, the Forest Stewards Guild, Gering Fire Department, and the WildEarth Guardians



**NATIONAL OFFICE**  
612 W. Main St., Suite 200  
Madison, WI 53703

**SOUTHWEST REGION OFFICE**  
2019 Galisteo St., Suite N7  
Santa Fe, NM 87505

[www.foreststewardsguild.org](http://www.foreststewardsguild.org)

The Forest Stewards Guild practices and promotes ecologically, economically, and socially responsible forestry as a means of sustaining the integrity of forest ecosystems and the human communities dependent on them. The Southwest Region of the Forest Stewards Guild promotes excellence in forest stewardship by working with partners, forest workers and landowners to promote a sustainable forest-based economy, fire adapted communities, and resilient forests and watersheds.

This project took place in the Rio Trampas watershed located within the work area of the Rio Grande Water Fund.

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