

Burning across fence lines: The Cottonwood Gulch/Pratt Ranch prescribed burn



During the last week in October, the Forest Stewards Guild added another chapter to the organization's history of prescribed burning in New Mexico. Guild staff and a diverse group of partners accomplished 101 acres of broadcast burning across two adjacent private landowner's property. The majority of those acres were on the Cottonwood Gulch Foundation, a non-profit youth summer camp. Remaining acres were burned on the Pratt Ranch.

As with other Guild prescribed burns, operations began with training opportunities for Guild staff and our partners. Jeremy Bailey, the Associate Director for Fire Training for the Nature Conservancy and burn boss, led burn participants in a refresher course to retain certification as wildland firefighters. Members of the local Volunteer Fire Department (VFD) from Bluewater Acres became certified as wildland fire fighters for the first time and completed their pack tests (3 miles in 45 minutes while wearing a 45 pound weight vest). Building the capacity of the local VFD to respond to wildfires in their jurisdiction was a major accomplishment.



Burn participants, including Cottonwood Gulch Assistant Director Jordan Stone (3rd from left), complete their pack tests.



Krista Bonfantine of Arid Land Ideas and Guild Southwest Director Eytan Krasilovsky observe fire behavior after laying down a strip of fire.



Burn boss Jeremy Bailey during a site visit in July.

photos: Matt Piccarello

It takes practice to see singed land as something good. Several years ago, the sight would have been terrifying to me, more like an apocalyptic scene than a healthy one. But as I learned more about how this forest evolved and which parts were ecologically healthy, my opinion of fire grew more nuanced; fire retained its destructive capability, but it gained the power to reawaken a listless landscape.

-Jordan Stone, Assistant Director of Cottonwood Gulch



Cottonwood Gulch Naturalist Cass Landguage, trekkers, and Jeremy Bailey during a july site visit.



Burn participants lay strips of fire under the direction of an ignition boss.

photos: Matt Piccarello

The burn unit was comprised mostly of ponderosa pine and was interspersed with piñon-juniper and patches of Gambel oak. The burn plan was guided in part by field surveys Guild intern Nick Biemiller completed this past summer. Several forest thinning projects throughout the unit over the last twenty years improved forest structure, however, several pockets of dense small-diameter ponderosa pine remained. Because the unit had not experienced fire in over one hundred years, a thick carpet of pine needles and dead and down logs created unsafe fuel loading which inhibited grass growth in the understory.

Cool and moist fall weather presented an opportunity to burn safely given the site conditions while still moving the forest towards a more resilient state. Despite a fair amount of precipitation earlier in the month, the rain stopped just in time to allow fuel on the site to dry out. Initial observations of fire effects indicated much of the unit burned at low to moderate severity. A few small areas of particularly dense ponderosa pine experienced torching. These openings will add biological diversity to the forest understory of grasses and wildflowers. Stump holes and thick layers of pine needles and duff continued to smolder even after over an inch of rain fell on the site. For several days, Bluewater Acres patrolled the unit and ensured that control lines held.





Bluewater Acres Volunteer Fire Department engine.

The Guild is fortunate to be part of a growing network of natural resource and fire professionals looking to gain experience in prescribed burning. Without these partners, the Cottonwood Gulch/Pratt burn would have been impossible. Organizations and individuals that participated in the burn included; the Cibola National Forest, U.S. Geological Survey, Isleta Pueblo, seasonal wildland firefighters, Bluewater Acres Volunteer Fire Department, Cottonwood Gulch Foundation, The Nature Conservancy, Arid Land Ideas, and the City of Santa Fe Fire Department. Additionally, the burn was supported by the McCune Charitable Foundation and by the Santa Fe County fire department and Bandelier National Monument who provided training and fire fighting equipment. The network grows with each prescribed burn and highlights the demand for experience in prescribed burning. With more prescribed broadcast and pile burns on the horizon, Southwest Guild staff will continue to make opportunities for our partners to gain experience returning fire to New Mexico forests.

The benefits of prescribed fire in New Mexico extend beyond ecology. Many communities remain fearful of prescribed burning, perhaps a legacy of the 48,000-acre Cerro Grande fire, an escaped prescribed burn that destroyed over four-hundred homes in Los Alamos, NM. With every successful prescribed burn the Guild and our partners complete, we foster greater acceptance and understanding of the need for prescribed and managed wildfire in New Mexico.



Observing smoke behavior.

photos: Jordan Stone



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The Forest Stewards Guild practices and promotes responsible forestry as a means of sustaining the integrity of forest ecosystems and the human communities dependent upon them. The Guild engages in education, training, policy analysis, research, and advocacy to foster excellence in stewardship, support practicing foresters and allied professionals, and engage a broader community in the challenges of forest conservation and management.

The cover photos were taken during the Cottonwood Gulch/Pratt Ranch prescribed burn. Both photos were taken by Matt Piccarello.