

## Wildfire Workshop Ignites Interest in 6-12 Teachers

by Heidi Smith



*Educators got a hands-on experience of forestry techniques for managing wildfire.*

To misquote Shakespeare, wildfire by any other name burns just as hot. Doesn't it? Yes and no. All wildfires have certain things in common, but the landscapes where they occur significantly affect how they manifest. Wildfires in western Washington have different characteristics than those in the eastern part of the state, as a group of 22 educators at a recent Engaging Communities in Forest Education: Fire Ecology workshop at North Cascades Institute discovered.

The group examined case studies of forest management practices before and after significant wildfires, heard from experts, performed hands-on forestry activities, and considered how management decisions affect different populations, especially underserved communities. Participants examined case studies of Washington State fires and the management decisions around them.

“Our collective understanding of fire regimes west of the Cascades is a quickly evolving story, alongside the increased threat from wildfires,” says PEI’s South Sound FieldSTEM Coordinator Lara Tukarski. “The partners involved and the work of those partners around the impact of fire on the landscape, both human and nonhuman, is what made this program a unique opportunity for teachers.”

Tukarski and PEI’s Northwest FieldSTEM Coordinator Amy Keiper co-facilitated the course with Nick Kunz, District Forester with Skagit Conservation District, and PEI board member Clare Sobetski, Youth Education and Outreach Program Manager at the Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

Participants learned from a range of partners, including Dr. Brian Harvey, a fire ecologist and assistant professor from the Harvey Lab and PhD candidate

Jenna Morris, both from the University of Washington;; John Kelley, Watershed Program Manager for the United States Forest Service (USFS) at Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest; John Gold, Burlington District Manager, Forester Jordan Williams, and Lisa Perry, Community Relations Manager with Sierra Pacific Industries (SPI), ; Scott Schuyler, Policy Representative for Natural and Cultural Resources for the Upper

Skagit Tribe; Brennan Filippini, a volunteer firefighter in Marblegate Washington; Josh Kursky, forester at Whatcom Conservation District, Alexis Bryson, the Community Wildfire Resilience Technician for Whatcom Conservation District; and Kirk Troberg, Kulshan Unit.

“We wanted teachers to be able to create their own place-based education experiences that would help their students understand the role of fire in forest ecology and specifically, management,” says Keiper, “and also to help teachers understand career pathways into forestry and what those might look like through the lens of a tribe or industry or a conservation organization.”



*Participants examined case studies of Washington State fires and the management decisions around them.*

Participants looked at case studies of three fires: the Sourdough Fire, which burned 6,639 acres of Whatcom County in 2023 and caused North Cascades Highway to close; the 2015 Goodell Fire, which forced evacuations and left hikers stranded throughout North Cascades National Park and endangered Lake Diablo Dam, which supplies 14% of Seattle’s electricity through hydropower; and the 1998 Jordan Creek Fire, which had ongoing impacts on industrial and private non-industrial forest landowners and delayed recovery efforts before SPI purchased the land in 2006. All three burn sites have impacts extending beyond their local effects.



*Many participants plan to use the resources and connections they gained at the workshop to teach their students about fire ecology.*

The Goodell Fire case study prompted a discussion of factors affecting management decisions before and during such events, with a focus on impact to local homeowners, public utilities, tribes, and the National Park Service. “It was impactful to see the teachers engage in the discussion around the impacts of management decisions on Seattle City Light, local tribes, and industry,” Keiper notes. “When you have limited resources but you’re trying to protect as many people as possible, then people in rural and remote communities are often placed lower on the list. Historically, that supports racism and means that disadvantaged communities are further disadvantaged in this scenario. Do you focus more on urban areas with your limited resources? It was a fascinating discussion of how to consider priorities.”

Teachers appreciated the direct contact with experts, hands-on learning opportunities, and career connections. “I learned so much about forests and fire ecology,” says one participant. “I didn’t know there were so many jobs related to this field. I now feel like I can make more connections [between this field] and our current curriculum.”

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“I love the balance of classroom time, guest speakers, and hands-on activities,” says another. “We received so many valuable activities and connections to experts who are willing and able to support us in making authentic learning experiences for our students. Thank you for this incredible opportunity!”

The Engaging Communities in Forest Education: Fire Ecology workshop is supported with funding from Washington’s Climate Commitment Act. The CCA supports Washington’s climate action efforts by putting cap-and-invest dollars to work reducing climate pollution, creating jobs, and improving public health. Information about the CCA is available at [www.climate.wa.gov](http://www.climate.wa.gov).

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