



2022 ME-TREX: A day of “Fire Vacation” in southern Maine

By Amanda Mahaffey

“Amanda, are you ready to go yet?” Jon asks with fading patience.

“Almost,” I reply efficiently. I grab the last radios off the chargers, set them carefully in the Pelican case, and dash out the door of the ICP, or incident command post. I climb into the bed of Jon’s pickup truck and make room for the case amidst the line gear, prescribed burn road signs, and other assorted equipment that has become commonplace over the last couple weeks. As Jon finishes up a conversation with Aliessa, one of the other IMT (incident management team) leaders, I hop down and swing myself into the driver’s seat. A moment later, Jon climbs into the passenger seat, and I can smell the coffee in his travel mug. Mine has tea, which is all the caffeine I need for a long day. We’ve settled into a routine during the prescribed fire training exchange, or TREX, which has brought together over 30 wildland firefighters together for an intensive two weeks of prescribed fire training in southern Maine.



“Let’s go,” Jon says, “I want to get the burn permit and get a few other things set up before folks get there.” I start the engine and roll the pickup truck cautiously down the long camp driveway, past the rows of wildland fire engines and trucks from multiple states and agencies. Each vehicle is abuzz with last-minute engine checks and other preparations for a day of prescribed fire. I smile and wave cheerfully at the men and women in yellows and greens as they, too, get ready to roll. Jon’s BK radio squawks in the cupholder between us with intermittent chatter between the crews. In a minute, we reach the paved road. I look carefully for speedy cars, signal, then pull onto the road, headed south. The GMC’s engine roars, and we’re on our way once again from our base at the Maine Teen Camp in Porter to The Nature Conservancy’s Wells Barrens Preserve.

I’m focused on the road, but glance over at Jon. He’s got a folder out with maps and papers with numbers, which he sorts through one-handed while sipping his coffee. He’s intent on the task at hand, going through a mental checklist of last-minute tasks before today’s burn

operations. I let him think in peace and focus on the drive. We turn through the town of Cornish and onto Route 5. Over the past week, I've noticed the fall colors deepening daily. The red maples along the river look particularly vibrant this morning in the light fog.

Jon looks up. "I want to swing by the Wells Fire Department to get the burn permit. At this point, I could probably take care of it over the phone, but I just think it's important to have that face-to-face communication whenever possible. Trust is so important. And we're burning a lot more acres than their typical landowner." Jon was right about that.

"Do we need to open the gate at the office first?" I ask.

"No," Jon replies, "Alex should get there first," referring to his right-hand seasonal employee. "But we will need to put up the signs. I miss Kent. Kent even wrapped up the cables and labeled the signs nicely," Jon adds a bit wistfully. Kent from the Maine Forest Service is the PIO, or public information officer, for the ME-TREX. Kent has been a wizard at posting signs, knocking on neighbors' doors, and contacting the media about the fire training. Today, Kent is in Augusta at an important meeting with his Forest Service colleagues, so it's up to Jon to do this legwork he always does for the prescribed burns he bosses in his work as a land manager for The Nature Conservancy. Over the course of the TREX, I've seen Jon loosen up a bit and enjoy having help from an entire IMT, rather than having to do everything himself.



We enter a cell phone dead zone, so Jon puts on some music. Over the past week of commuting together, we've laughed, joked, talked, and listened to music. Jon and I are only a week apart in age, and I've come to think of him as a fire brother. After some banter, Jon puts on "Wake Me Up When September Ends." I don't know what's going on in Jon's mind, but I need music to help me process big events. This two-week TREX is the culmination of years of work with our friends in prescribed fire in Maine, a strong set of partner agencies and organizations working together to advance good fire – ecological burning and hazardous fuels reduction – in Maine and across the North Atlantic region. After some slower, wetter

days last week, our TREX group has hit our stride. With fair weather ahead, we're crescendoing to a strong finish to the ME-TREX. I tap my foot and nod my head to the rock and roll. It's been a lot of work, but indescribably rewarding. *Wake me up when September ends.*

We exit the cell phone dead zone as the road climbs a ridge with a sweeping vista of this corner of York County. Southern Maine is densely populated, but views like this remind me of its rural character. Jon puts in his earbuds and reclaims his cell phone to start making calls on his burn notification list. One by one, he calls fire chiefs, dispatch centers, and others who might get a call from a concerned citizen about smoke in the air. I've heard him rattle off his phone number so many times that I have it memorized. Still, I half-listen as I drive. I'm struck again by the fact that Jon's usually on his own making these calls while pulling together a hundred other details before a prescribed burn. He has to deal with all sorts of people in his job. Some are happy to hear from him, others less so. The other day at Kennebunk Plains, a group of pheasant

hunters spoke rudely to him and discharged their weapons in his direction when he asked them to please stay out of the area we were about to burn and be mindful of firefighters' safety.

Finally, Jon finishes his calls and looks up. We keep chatting about the day ahead, and soon, we're in Wells. Unfortunately, the cards are not in our favor to obtain a burn permit in person. We get stuck behind a slow passenger vehicle and arrive at the Wells fire station just in time to see the structural engines leaving in a hurry with lights and sirens. I remind Jon that he can use the online system to get the permit, which he does while I drive us back to his office at the Wells Barrens.

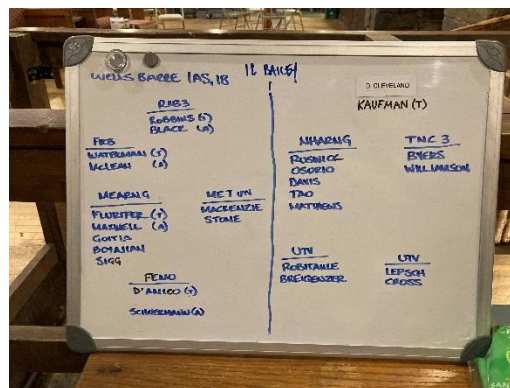
When we arrive, a car with out-of-state plates is parked in the trailhead parking area, which should be closed by now. We zip down the road in both directions and set up the "PRESCRIBED FIRE AHEAD - DO NOT REPORT" and "SMOKE - LIMITED VISIBILITY" signs, then set up traffic cones to block off the parking lot. The irate hiker is just leaving. It's never safe to have looky-loos around during a burn.

We pull up the driveway and circle through the gaggle of engines, UTVs, and personnel gathered. Jon's office is upstairs from the large garage, and Jon disappears quickly to print off more maps. As incident commander, or IC, he perhaps could have delegated that task, but it was his office.

I pull out the white board with the organizational chart for today's incident. The org structure was thoughtfully planned out at the previous night's Plans meeting by Aliesha and Dan. Aliesha is a Ranger with the Maine Forest Service and part of the leadership team of the Maine Prescribed Fire Council. During the TREX, she's been working closely with Dan from the Oregon Military Department. Dan has been helping Aliesha towards her RXB2 burn boss qualification; the two of them spend long hours at the nightly planning meetings assigning personnel and equipment for the next day's operations. Aliesha's boundless energy and Dan's infamous sarcasm make for high hilarity at these meetings. To balance them out is Dave, a retired FMO from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. While Aliesha and Dan are focused on implementation, Dave's role in training has been to take a step back and help guide us in the right direction. Dave has been a guardian angel to our TREX in more ways than one. He's always ready with a thoughtful, kindly-worded suggestion for doing things better.

I spot Tim and catch his eye. "How's it going?" I ask. Tim is the fourth person on our Council leadership team, representing the Maine Army National Guard. For the TREX, he's in the operations role, and among other things, has been managing the transport of vehicles and equipment.

"Good," Tim replies with a smile. "Hey, in a minute, we'd like to circle up the IMT to firm up the plans for today." The last line is said with a hint of secrecy. Our TREX participants don't yet know that while some will be burning a few small but squirrely units, others will be



doing initial attack, or IA, exercises. I nod and smile back at Tim. As I bustle about, helping people where I can in my logistical role, I keep an eye out for the IMT huddle.

Unlike a few days ago, today, everyone has a clear assignment on an engine or UTV and knows what they should be doing to get ready. Shon from Pennsylvania will be leading a burn as an RXB3 trainee while Aliesha supports him. On that same line, Allan from Rhode Island and Chase from Maryland will work on firing, or ignitions. The Maine Army National Guard engine is populated by Colleen from West Virginia, Emory from Florida, Zack from New Hampshire, Hannah from Wisconsin, and a day participant from Vermont. UTVs and fire effects monitors, or FEMOs, round out the crew. Meanwhile, the initial attack group double-checks their equipment, two Type 6 engines and two UTVs. There's still the inevitable hurry-up-and-wait, but it's clear that we're much tighter as an operational unit. As the fog clears and the clouds dissipate above, a current of anticipation seems to charge the air.

Soon, I see the IMT circling up near the water tank, and I wander over. For the IA exercises, a set list of numbered scenarios is distributed. Radio comms will be on only one channel, so the numbering will help maintain the surprise. Dave will play the role of dispatch. I will remain at the staging area to track crews as they come and go and encourage them to be ready for anything.



At last, it's time for the on-site morning briefing. As RXB3 burn boss for the day, Aliesha calls the group together, outlines the assignments and plan, and answers questions. We have a reminder from Fern, an IMT member from ESRI, for folks to check their Fieldmaps app and utilize it to collect data during the day's operations. Fern's TREX and wildfire experience has truly helped us level up our game. I look around the briefing circle and reflect on how great a

group this is, how fortunate we are to have such diverse perspectives in fire and a welcoming culture to embrace new approaches to our work. The briefing soon concludes, and half of the group heads towards the regular prescribed burn units with Aliesha and Shon. Other IMT members, including Jon, Tim, and Dave, vanish as well.

I catch two special guests, Bill and Hunter, and steer them towards the burn operations in the company of Alex and Parker, who are monitoring fire effects for the day. Bill is a renowned professor of fire science in the Northeast. Even in his retirement, he keeps busy in the fire science community and loves joining us in the field to stay sharp and impart his humble wisdom to others. Hunter is an employee of the National Weather Service, and today is his first time seeing a live fire in action. Bill will be an outstanding "tour guide" for Hunter as they observe fire effects and weather parameters interacting with the fuels on this burn. I ensure that Bill and Hunter have adequate PPE and know where to go, then I send them on their way.



With half of the group out of sight, a momentary lull wraps the staging area. Then the 1200 weather readout comes over the radio.

Temperature, 60. Relative humidity, 64. Winds light and variable out of the west. Probability of ignition, 40. *Please let there be more wind*, I think. A few days ago, we burned at Kennebunk Plains in winds that pushed the prescription. However,

it turned out that those winds produced the fire behavior and smoke lift that we really needed. It was a successful burn of 80 acres, and everyone went home safely (despite the pheasant hunters).

The crews waiting at staging become impatient. Some pull out their Kestrels to take their own weather measurements, while others climbed onto trailers and a log pile, gazing northeastward in search of smoke.

Lisa, a Ranger with the Maine Forest Service, sidles up to me. "It's suspiciously quiet here without Dan," she says, "I bet he's off lighting something on fire." I smile, but don't say anything.

"You can't tell me, can you?" she continues. I smile more broadly behind my safety glasses. "Well, we'll be ready!" Lisa says gleefully, and goes back to looking for signs of smoke.

It isn't long before the first call comes in over the radio. I recognize Dave's voice.

"Staging, dispatch," he calls.

"Go ahead for staging," I reply.

"We have a report of an escaped campfire that appears to be threatening a couple of structures. Break." Dave pauses. "Requesting resources to respond to the incident. We need a Type 6 engine and crew." Dave recites a few additional details, including the coordinates, then adds for any radio eavesdroppers, "This is only a drill. Repeat. Only a simulation."

"Staging copies," I respond and recite back the resource request. "Stand by."

I holler to the crew waiting eagerly for orders, "Hey folks, circle up!" I repeat the request for a Type 6 engine and say, "Kim, you're up."

Kim from the New Hampshire Army National Guard is working on her ICT5 leadership taskbook and is thrilled to be called to respond. She cheerfully rounds up her crew of Steven from Pennsylvania, Annabelle from New York, Morgan from Oregon, and a day participant from Maine's call-when-needed fire crew. They take off down the sandy road in the Guard's Type 6 engine. A moment later, I radio dispatch to report the crew is en route. I can hear a loud thump down the road as the shiny Guard engine navigates a bump bigger than the pavement potholes it was designed to handle.



Quickly, Kim and her crew arrive on scene, and Kim calls in the sizeup details to the dispatcher. The fire is a half-acre, to be named the 2B wildfire, and two UTVs with crew are needed. Back a staging, the two UTVs don't need to be told twice. Bob, a day participant and former fire chief, speeds off with Peter, a master's student from the University of Maine. In another UTV, Tyler from Georgia whirls off with Ryan from Virginia.



Over the radio, I hear the traffic as Kim manages the incident, communicates effectively with her crews and dispatch, and calls the fire out at 1240. Her triumphant engine crew returns to staging and sets about refilling the water tank. "That was fun!" Kim exclaims. The UTVs soon make their way back to staging and join the engine by the fold-a-tank to top off their water.

My phone buzzes in my radio harness. It's Dave.

"Amanda," he says, "We're setting up to run scenario 4. That's scenario 4. Please respond with a Type 6 and put Lisa in command." I acknowledge the message and sign off.

Pretty soon, radio traffic starts picking up over on the prescribed burn units. At this time, we're all supposed to be on the same radio channel. It sounds like Shon is beginning operations. I hear the radio traffic that test fire has been ignited. A short while later, the radio gets my attention, and this time, it's for me.

"Staging, dispatch." Dave's voice.

"Go ahead for staging." I respond.

"We have a report of a lost hunter in unit 2B of the Wells Barrens." Dispatch then relayed a request for a Type 6 engine, and reminded listeners that this was only a simulation. I call Lisa over.

"Lisa, you're up," I say.

"How do you know it's me and not Brian?" Lisa asks. Her engine-mate for the day is also working on his ICT5 taskbook.

"You'll know," I say.

The other day when we'd run IA exercises, both Lisa and Brian had reflected in the AAR, or after-action review, that they'd learned a lot from their first trials. As I recalled, Brian had requested a Type 1 helicopter bucket drop. I was sure he'd been put up to it, but it still produced a round of laughter at dispatch's response: "Do you know what state you're in? There are no Type 1 helos in the State of Maine."

At any rate, Lisa and Brian are ready to go. As their engine rolls away, I hear another call come from dispatch.

"The lost hunter is a male in his 50s by the name of Hungry Ho..." Dave says.

"Dispatch, please repeat. I missed the hunter's name," I say, wondering whose end of the radio was at fault.

"Hungry Horace," Dave says. *Horse?* I think.

"Hungry what?" I say, choking back a laugh.



"Hungry Horace. H-O-R-A-C-E. Horace." I nearly drop my radio giggling. "Mr. Horace has no health issues at this time, but he says he got separated from his ATV and started a fire to heat up his lunch." So now we have a lost ATV and a wildfire.

"Copy that," I say. I wonder who of the IMT gets to play the lost hunter. Tim, I recall, had packed some blaze orange on his ATV. A moment later, I hear radio traffic that Lisa and Brian are on scene, and Lisa will manage the wildfire while Brian manages the lost hunter. An incident within an incident (IWI) within the larger incident of the TREN training. Lisa names the fire "2B or not 2B."

By now, the radio traffic is getting more complicated with the prescribed fire picking up activity and the IWI ongoing in the IA unit. I hear the igniters calling in their locations and holding resources tracking the fire's progress. Communications are clear and steady, and it sounds like the burn operations are going well.

As the afternoon rolls on, I keep tabs on all the activity via the radio. My radio misses some of the traffic, but luckily, Eric from the Maine Guard has a radio that catches the other channel. We sit and listen to Lisa, Brian, and dispatch as the hunter's wildfire is contained and he is reunited with his ATV. I hear dispatch read out a home address for the hunter in a town I know to be Tim's.

"Hungry Horace would appreciate someone giving his wife a call to let her know he's okay," says Dave as dispatch, "The number is 207...."

All of a sudden, I realize that Tim, or Hungry Horace, is giving Jon's cell phone number. I laugh out loud and explain the joke to Eric.

"Give me that number," Eric says. I repeat the numbers, and Eric dials Jon's phone.

"Hey," he says when the unsuspecting Jon picks up, "Mrs. Hungry Horace, we found your husband. He was lost in the woods, but he's okay and will come home soon. Bye." Eric hangs up, and we laugh uncontrollably.

The afternoon shadows lengthen, and some clouds gather at the edge of the sky. A third IA incident is called, and Steve responds with the New Hampshire Guard engine and crew. One of the UTVs has a flat tire, this time for real. Activity picks up on the prescribed burn units. All available engines are called over to the prescribed fire. When Steve's wildfire, named Blazing Star, wraps up, everyone heads over to the prescribed burn units. Parker, one of our local fire gurus, sends me text messages with photos and videos of the activity. It looks like a good time. I want to see the grand finale, but instead, I get out my computer in a desperate attempt to complete some time-sensitive TREN paperwork. I soon hear over the radio that firing operations are complete and the unit has been rung.



I see drips of rain beginning to dot my laptop. In a minute, the skies are completely gray, and the drips progress to a drizzle. In another minute, a brief downpour ensues. I relocate to a dry spot and button up the paperwork. In just a couple minutes, the rain is over, saving the hardworking crews from serious mop-up. All in all, it's not a bad way to end the day.

The slightly damp, triumphant firefighters return to the staging area and begin rehabbing equipment. As much as it takes time to set up, it also takes time to reset for the next day's operations. The IMT supports the crews in refilling tanks, dealing with broken equipment, and other end-of-day tasks. I pass around the "shnacks" bag loaded with granola bars, chips, and chocolate. Then we all break for AAR, except for Dave, who is on a call with FEMA about mobilizing in response to Hurricane Ian down in Florida. It's after 1700, or 5:00 p.m. Everyone is tired, happy, and hungry, but it's critical to pause for the AAR and reflect on the day.

The group circles up in the parking lot. Smoky faces and big smiles abound. It's been a great day of burning and learning together. Participants share things that went well and things we could do better next time. We are reminded that the drive home can be the most dangerous part of a fire operation. The AAR wraps up, and we are clear to head back to camp, late for dinner once again.



In small groups, the crews scatter and get on the road. I catch Hunter and Bill and ask how their day went. They both had a good time and learned a lot from watching the fireline operations. I encourage Hunter to come out on more fires.

"Weather folks play a key role in wildland fires as well as prescribed fires. It'd be great to have you out on the ground with us again!" I say. Something in Hunter's grateful smile tells me we will probably see him again on a future prescribed burn. I thank Bill again for spending the day with us, and confirm he has a ride back to his lodging.

The sunlight fades, and soon, Jon and I are the last to leave. We lock the gate and start the drive back to camp. Jon drives this time. As usual, we joke on each other, then put on some music and keep the conversation going. By now, it's dark enough that I can barely see the colors in the leaves on the trees we pass. I'm sure they've deepened while we were out playing with fire.

I know it's been a long day for Jon, and it's been a long TREX. My mind is full of the great learning experiences that everyone is having, and I try to wrap my head around all we've been through as a group. It's hard to believe we're almost at the end of the ME-TREX. As we talk through the preparations for our final day of burning tomorrow, I imagine Jon must be tired. But still, he keeps on going.

"Jon, can I ask you something?" I say, breaking into the flow of jokes to ask a serious question. "What is it that makes you tick about prescribed fire? I mean, what makes you love it enough to make this the focus of so much of your work?"



Jon pauses a moment before replying. “It’s not just that fire is like a live thing,” he says, thinking as he speaks, “It’s also that it’s this tool you get to use and manipulate the system with, only it’s part of the system already. So you’re helping do what nature wants to do all along. And then you get to see the results of your work right afterwards, but then also later when things green up again. And you can keep coming back to the same units and shape how they grow and change over time.”

I appreciate Jon’s sharing his reflection with me, and say so. As we wind our way through the dark back roads, I reflect on how awesome this whole ME-TREX experience has been. We’ve been blessed to have such an amazing group of participants, leaders, and special guests all coming together to build our collective experience in prescribed fire in the Northeast. Two weeks of solid field time, learning and burning, building group cohesion around shared objectives of training, treatment, and outreach. The first TREX in the Northeast, hopefully the first of many. After a day like today, we’re primed to end the ME-TREX on a high note and send everyone home safely. It’s been a great time.

Where will we go from here with prescribed fire in Maine? I can’t tell you right now. All that seems to matter is being in this moment. I’m happy to be in present company, pleased with how the day has gone, and excited for the days ahead.



Thanks to Parker, Maddie, and Kent for many of the photos used in this document.



To read a summary of the full ME-TREX, visit:
<https://www.firesciencenorthatlantic.org/post/maine-trex-2022>