



Northern Rockies Fire Science Network

A JFSP FIRE SCIENCE EXCHANGE NETWORK

Perspectives: Preparing the Next Generation Through Student Fire Associations

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Max McComsey was visiting friends in Washington D.C. when he came across a free little library and picked up a copy of Norman MacLean's *Young Men and Fire*. Reading the book, McComsey learned about smokejumpers, fire fighting, and the University of Montana (UM). After a little research of his own, McComsey was hooked. He transferred from college in his home state of Maryland to UM in Missoula, majoring in forestry with a minor in fire science.

Now in his third senior year at UM, McComsey was recently elected President of the UM Fire Club. Last summer, he worked on a federal fire crew out of the Superior Ranger District on the Lolo National Forest; this year, he has a job lined up on a crew based out of the Hungry Horse Ranger District on the Flathead National Forest. McComsey knows many UM students with summer fire jobs who aren't involved in the Fire Club, but he says participation in the club helps prepare you for what to expect and provides valuable networking opportunities in the forestry and fire world.

Across the country, the wildland firefighting workforce is struggling to meet the demands of increased wildfire activity and prescribed burn implementation. A [2023 report](#) from the National Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission recommended increasing training and educational opportunities to build capacity and expand the prescribed fire workforce. Student Fire Associations, including those in the Northern Rockies region such as the University of



A student from the University of Montana Fire Club works on a prescribed burn at Lubrecht Experimental Forest, MT
(Photo courtesy of UM Fire Club)

The Northern Rockies Fire Science Network (NRFSN) serves as a go-to resource for managers and scientists involved in fire and fuels management in the Northern Rockies. The NRFSN is funded by the Joint Fire Science Program and is one of 15 Fire Science Exchange Networks across the country. The NRFSN facilitates knowledge exchange by bringing people together to strengthen collaborations, synthesize science, and enhance science application around critical management issues.



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Montana's Fire Club or the University of Idaho's SAFE club, are well-positioned to contribute to this effort. NRFSN spoke with UM Fire Club President Max McComsey, and University of Idaho SAFE Club Vice-President Ramsey Marquis about how students in the region are working to develop skills through formal student fire associations.

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA STUDENT ASSOCIATION FOR FIRE ECOLOGY AND MANAGEMENT

At the University of Montana, the Student Association for Fire Ecology and Management (also known as Fire Club) is housed within the broader Forestry Club, which has upwards of 150 students enrolled. Max estimates there is a core group of 40-50 students who regularly participate in club activities. Funding comes primarily from the Associated Students of the University of Montana (ASUM) and goes towards maintenance costs for tools, gas for chainsaws, and other upkeep expenses.

Fire Club unfolds the same way each year, operating on a predictable pattern of events. New students join and the goal is to get them ready for fire season. For returning students, there are opportunities to participate in prescribed burns, guest speakers, and continual skills building. Each year the cycle repeats. Max emphasized that over the course of the year, the aim of the club is to send the first years off to their summer fire jobs well prepared and ready to make a good impression. The forestry and fire world in Montana is a relatively small one, so putting yourself out there, getting involved, and meeting people always pays off. "People are probably better off in the forestry world if they come to club," Max said.

Another benefit of Fire Club is the chance to participate in prescribed burns. These opportunities come through the club's partnership with the [National Center for Landscape Fire Analysis](#), also known as the UM FireCenter. A staff member from the FireCenter serves as club advisor, helping to provide



Students from the UM Fire Club club discuss logistics for a prescribed burn at Lubrecht Experimental Forest, MT (photo courtesy of UM Fire Club)

students with relevant, hands-on experience. Usually there are opportunities to work on prescribed burns in both the spring and fall for the club members, although the spring can be a bit tricky given Montana's finicky weather. Burns happen at UM's Lubrecht Experimental Forest, on private land, and on land held by conservation groups such as The Nature Conservancy (TNC). In some cases, such as prescribed burns taking place on the college-owned forest, students do not need an Incident Qualification Card (Red Card). In other instances, such as on TNC land, only students with Red Cards can participate in the burn. Max explained that going to a prescribed burn with the Fire Club before your first summer is a good experience and sets you up to know what to expect.

To prepare students for wildland fire work, participation in the club exposes them to physical labor almost immediately. "Fire is just hard work, no matter how you cut it," Max said. He recounted a story of one of the first club gatherings in the fall, a work party at Lubrecht, where he dug fire line with the new freshman. For Max, it was something he had been doing all summer, but the freshman ended the day exhausted, with terrible blisters.

"Fire is just hard work, no matter how you cut it"
- Max McComsey

Although this can be a challenge, Max emphasized that the role of Fire Club is to get new students in a headspace to not give up and to find the fun in the work, no matter how hard it is. He also acknowledged that working in wildland fire can be scary to newcomers. The workforce has its fair share of "gruff older men," and might be initially intimidating. But by participating in Fire Club, students are better equipped to face whatever challenges they may encounter.

All things considered, Max expressed that being in Fire Club is a truly special opportunity. "I can't name anywhere else besides the University where you can learn and practice so much in such a short amount of time," he said. The combination of hands-on learning through fire work in the summer, coupled with classroom and club learning the rest of the year provides a unique opportunity to really apply knowledge in both directions. "Fire is equal parts science and work," Max said, "But I like that it has always been grounded in chainsaws."

UNIVERSITY OF IDAHO SAFE CLUB

Ramsey Marquis is the vice-president of the University of Idaho's SAFE Club. The club is a chapter of the national Student Association for Fire Ecology (SAFE) and members of UI SAFE interact with the national organization by way of national SAFE club elections, and related events and conferences. Ramsey is in his third year of involvement with the club, he started going to events when he was a sophomore. As the club's vice president, he is in charge of coordinating in-person activities and leading regular meetings.

The UI SAFE Club has around 20 members, with a core group of 8-15 who regularly participate in club activities. The primary activity for the club is called "Firefighter for Hire." Every Sunday, UI

SAFE Club members will visit a local property in the Moscow area and spend a few hours doing vegetation thinning or other work to reduce fire risk. As the vice president, Ramsey leads these events, instructs club members on proper tool use, and organizes future opportunities. The majority of funding for the club comes from donations from landowners. While Ramsey said the club doesn't charge for the work they do on private land during "Firefighter for Hire" events, they suggest an hourly rate of \$20/hour for donations.



Students in the University of Idaho SAFE Club at a "Firefighter for Hire" event near Moscow, ID
(Photo courtesy of Ramsey Marquis)

From Ramsey's perspective, one of the main benefits of being involved in the club is experience with a chainsaw. "You get skills building opportunities," he explained, "For college students doing fire, you can only work three months, which isn't a lot for a fire crew." Through participation in club activities, students get "more time on the saw" to improve their skills and experience. The club has also offered two S-212 courses on wildland fire chainsaw operations. In both instances, the course was taught by former UI SAFE Club members who have gone on to have careers in wildland firefighting.

Another way students in the UI SAFE Club gain experience is through an annual spring break trip to the southeastern U.S. where they have the opportunity to work with an agency on a prescribed burn. This year, the UI SAFE

Club partnered with The Nature Conservancy in Arkansas. “We got to meet a lot of good people who have been doing prescribed burning for a long time,” Ramsey said. Everyone they worked with was generous with their time and the students came away with references, job opportunities, and good connections. “We try to offer professional opportunities like that,” Ramsey said.

Beyond the hands-on opportunities for learning and skill building, Ramsey emphasized that participating in UI SAFE Club provides a chance to work outside and bond with like-minded people. “To put it simply, it’s fun,” he said. “I love being outdoors, doing these kinds of things, working with people.” Like Max McComsey from the University of Montana, Ramsey expressed passion for the role of the club and a message of inclusion. “You don’t have to be in fire, you don’t have to have a ton of experience, the door is open,” he said.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- University of Montana Fire Club: <https://www.umt.edu/environment/resources/student-clubs/>
- University of Idaho SAFE Club: <https://www.uidaho.edu/cnr/departments/forest-rangeland-and-fire-sciences/future-students/student-clubs/safe-club>
- Resources for students studying fire: <https://fireecology.org/studying-fire>



University of Idaho SAFE Club students participate in a prescribed burn in Arkansas with The Nature Conservancy in March 2025
(Photo courtesy of Ramsey Marquis)

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