

# Leaders

## We Would Like to Meet

Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program



### Interview with Tom Zimmerman

by Emily Nemore



Tom Zimmerman at his NPS going away party in 2002

#### Man of Many Firsts

Tom Zimmerman is a man of many firsts. He has blazed the trail for fire ecology throughout his impressive career, repeatedly returning to school to further his knowledge and practice of wildland fire management.

#### Scouting the path

Since his junior high years, Zimmerman knew he wanted to work in the woods. Shifting his sights from game warden to forest ranger, he graduated high school and headed straight for the University of Montana's Forestry program in 1968. His interests were piqued by wildland fire, and after he exhausted every fire course offered (only two at the time), he set about determining his own independent projects to satisfy his interests. He developed training material for teaching fire management to undergraduate students for his senior thesis, and finished his Bachelor of Science degree in 1972.

Like many college students, he worked summers on trail and fire crews. He worked the 1971 season on the Del Rosa Interagency Hotshot Crew (IHC) (1971, San Bernardino

National Forest); after graduation, and making a quick pass through the Pike IHC in the beginning of the 1972 fire season, Zimmerman left to form and supervise a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Initial Attack crew out of Glenwood Springs, Colorado. His supervisory roles continued in 1973 when the BLM Glenwood Springs and Grand Junction Districts merged. Less than a year later he moved to his first permanent job as the BLM Forester and Fire Control Officer in Meeker, Colorado.

During this time, Zimmerman maintained his feverish interest in fire ecology. He devoured articles and books about the effects of fire on trees and habitats.

**“I think the key is sometimes the best leaders stay with something and guide people through it even when they don't know they need it.”**

He looked at how other agencies and areas practiced and tested prescribed burning and monitoring, and observed the benefits fire brought to the landscape.

"It made a lot of sense to me. There were always fires that we needed to put out, and there always would be; but there were fires that we didn't need to put out."

In the days when the 10 am policy was still in effect and few fire use and prescribed fire programs existed, these concepts were somewhat controversial. But Zimmerman, knowing it was the way to go, resigned from his post and entered the University of Idaho to pursue a Master of Science in Prescribed Fire and Fire Ecology in 1977.

Zimmerman was tasked with setting up the University's first prescribed fire research program as the first graduate student of Professor Emeritus Leon Neuenschwander. (Neuenschwander has since been recognized "as a national spokesman for restoring fire's role in forest ecosystems," receiving multiple awards, publishing research and books, and teaching hundreds of students by the time he retired in 2002).

University of Idaho (2008). "Idaho Students, Emeriti Earn Nation's Hottest Awards in Fire Ecology".  
<http://www.today.uidaho.edu/Details.aspx?ID=4192>

"That was a fascinating time because fire ecology was really starting to gain momentum. I learned so much there. It was almost as if I couldn't get enough to learn about."

Shortly after completing his graduate work, Zimmerman took a job with the BLM as the District Fire Management Officer (FMO) in Craig, Colorado and promptly started a very successful and very active prescribed fire program. Zimmerman's quest for the uncharted continued when in 1981, less than two years later, he resigned his post to enter a PhD program at Colorado State University (CSU).

While at CSU, Zimmerman spearheaded a research project on prescribed burning, focusing on dwarf mistletoe in lodgepole pine. He worked with the US Forest Service in Gunnison, Colorado and FMO Gerald Chonka to implement plans that opened the door for a successful prescribed fire program, earning his doctorate by 1990.

From 1985 to 1989, Zimmerman returned to the BLM Colorado State Office as the State Fire Management Planning Specialist, where he continued facilitating the movement from fire suppression to fire management, and building prescribed fire and fire monitoring programs.

He then moved to a new position with the National Park Service (NPS) as the Rocky Mountain Regional Fire Director in Denver, Colorado. After four years, he transferred to the NPS National Office for Wildland Fire

at the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) in Boise, Idaho. From 1993 to 2003, Zimmerman worked as a Fire Technology Specialist, and then moved to the Science and Ecology Program Lead.

### **Leading the pack on policy**

"So many things happened at the national office."

Zimmerman was key in influencing policy. He worked on the 1995 Federal Fire Policy, and became a strong voice and presenter of policy throughout these years. He and his colleagues were responsible for building up fire management planning as a desired practice, which eventually became a mandatory practice.

"Fires in mid-90s really set us on the path for addressing a prescribed natural fire and wildland fire use programs. From that we created Fire Use Management Teams, Fire-Use Modules, Fire Use Manager[s], fire effects monitor[s]..."

Zimmerman also co-authored Wildland and Prescribed Fire Implementation and Procedures Reference Guide, which described procedures for policy movement, from prescribed natural fire (1989) to wildland fire use (1995). (Revised in 2005 to "Wildland Fire Implementation and Procedures Reference Guide") This is one of most widely used documents in fire management.

In 2003, he left the NPS to be the US Forest Service Southwest Regional Fire Director in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and experienced the "most intense job [he'd] ever had." Since he left Albuquerque in 2007, he has been with the Rocky Mountain Research Station, as the Wildland Fire Research Development and Application (RD&A) Program Manager, stationed at NIFC. He is responsible for managing the Wildland Fire Decision Support System (WFDSS), with the primary role to take new research products and develop them into applications for the field.

"I feel pretty lucky. They have all been fantastic jobs; I've loved every one of them."

### **Do you have a favorite job?**

"The interesting thing is that every job I've had has been the best job, you know they just keep getting better."

**Clearly, you were a vital player in the policy and cultural shift from fire suppression to fire management - work that I'm sure didn't come without hurdles. How did you respond or change behavior after receiving [political] pressure to suppress every fire during the 10 am policy era?**

We wrote a lot of prescribed fire plans, and tried to institute them. In the mid-80's we started to push the

right fire management plans so we could document the fire history of the area and justify why we wanted to do that - and we were successful. We started the prescribed fire plans in places where we hadn't before."

### **Putting policy to work**

Zimmerman successfully championed the natural fire message by using his educational research and pioneering career actions to serve on many leadership committees, incident management teams and write and teach fire curriculum.

### **Your career has been punctuated by education and specifically, ground-breaking research that has perpetuated the success of your field of study. Are there any specific examples of how your research or student projects have directly affected what you do?**

"My education led me to serve on many different NWCG committees and teach a lot of fire behavior courses throughout the years."

In fact, all of Zimmerman's work has been used in one way or another. His undergraduate senior thesis research and training materials were used as a case study for future classes. His master's thesis was a research prescribed burn on grazed and un-grazed forest lands which garnered numerous calls over the years from universities and researchers looking for more information.

Zimmerman's PhD research was much more comprehensive, and while he jokingly recalls that "prescribed crown fire isn't too popular," his other research has piqued a lot of interest.

"I did directly apply my doctoral research to write lessons for the for first fire effects training courses (RX310 Introduction to Fire Effects and RX510 Applied Fire Effects) that are still part of the curriculum today."

He also taught many fire behavior courses, and became involved with numerous National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) committees:

- Chair, RX590 Wildland Fire Behavior Analysis Steering Committee (combined with S590 in 1996)
- Chair, NWCG Fire Behavior Advisory Committee
- Chair, S580 Advanced Wildland Fire Applications Steering Committee. Faculty S580
- Faculty, S520 Advanced Incident Management (since 1995)
- Co-Chair, S620 Area Command (since 2005)

Zimmerman's work on incident management teams is impressive.

"I've been on teams since 1980 and eventually made my way up. From 1995 to 2008 I was a part of an Area Command Team, both as an Area Commander and Planning Coordinator. As Area Commander, I helped set a standard for strategic thinking and better resource allocation."

He has also served as a Type 1 Planning Section Chief (qualified 1991) and as an Incident Commander (IC) on Fire Use Management teams (qualified 1995).

### **Passing the (drip) torch**

Tom Zimmerman is a true leader. He has influenced coworkers, supervisors, subordinates, colleagues and now a future generation of fire managers. He retired from his extraordinary 33 year career in January 2012.

### **What qualities do think a good leader should possess?**

A leader has to be many things. A leader is not going to be successful if they just stand up in front of a group and say 'here's how we're going to do it, and it's my way or the highway.' You have to be able to motivate... to be influential... be able to communicate... to have courage and deal with uncertainty. In fire management, every day is uncertain. I've found that integrity is extremely important, like saying 'I don't know' when I don't know something."

"One thing that has helped me a lot is creativity. A lot of the things I've accomplished were the result of sitting down and thinking of innovative solutions and not suppressing them. I've seen a lot of managers shy away from creativity, and I think you need that room to capitalize on the good ideas that might not otherwise be heard."

### **Do you identify any person(s) has having a great influence on you?**

"My professors had a huge impact on me, as well my mentors at the BLM. All were so passionate about the work that they did in the field. They taught me a lot about (how) to work through things, and the importance of safety and doing things the right way. I learned how to interact with people, both things to do and not to do."

### **Are there any mantras or quotes that you subscribe to as a leader?**

"Maybe none that I should repeat."

## What lessons learned or advice do you want to pass on to young leaders today?

"Leading is not always easy. You can lead in terms of goals and carrying out a task. You can lead in terms of concepts, knowledge and new directions. If you show strong qualities in leading the task, acceptance and following by your subordinates can go very well."

"Try to lead change, even though it is never 100% endorsed or flows very well. You can get tired of beating your head against a wall or you can stay with something that's the right thing to do, that's productive or influential or leads to better organizational efficiency and performance. I think the key is sometimes the best leaders stay with something and guide people through it even when they don't know they need it."

## Your passion and perseverance are sure indicators of why you have been so successful in your career. Are there any other factors that you can credit as instruments of your success?

"I was able to change jobs and take on new challenges frequently. And I was lucky; being in the right place at the right time, and fortunate to have such a flexible family, for which I am extremely grateful."

**Author's Note:** After spending just under an hour on the phone with Tom, I was overwhelmed by his commitment and perseverance to his beliefs about returning fire to the landscape. Without his contributions, wildland fire management would not be what it is today.

Emily Nemore interviewed Tom Zimmerman in 2010.