

“Neighbors Helping Neighbors” Spreads like Wildfire

Innovative Learning Exchanges Develop Prescribed Fire Professionals



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burning & learning together for five years has resulted in

68,000 Acres
of ecological prescribed fire

435 fire practitioners
mentored, on-the-ground experience

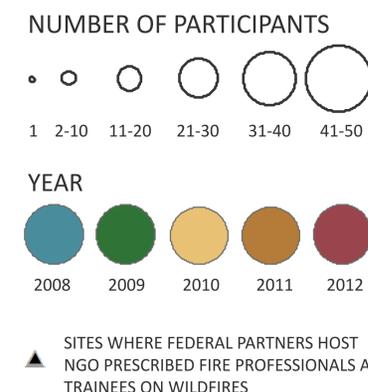
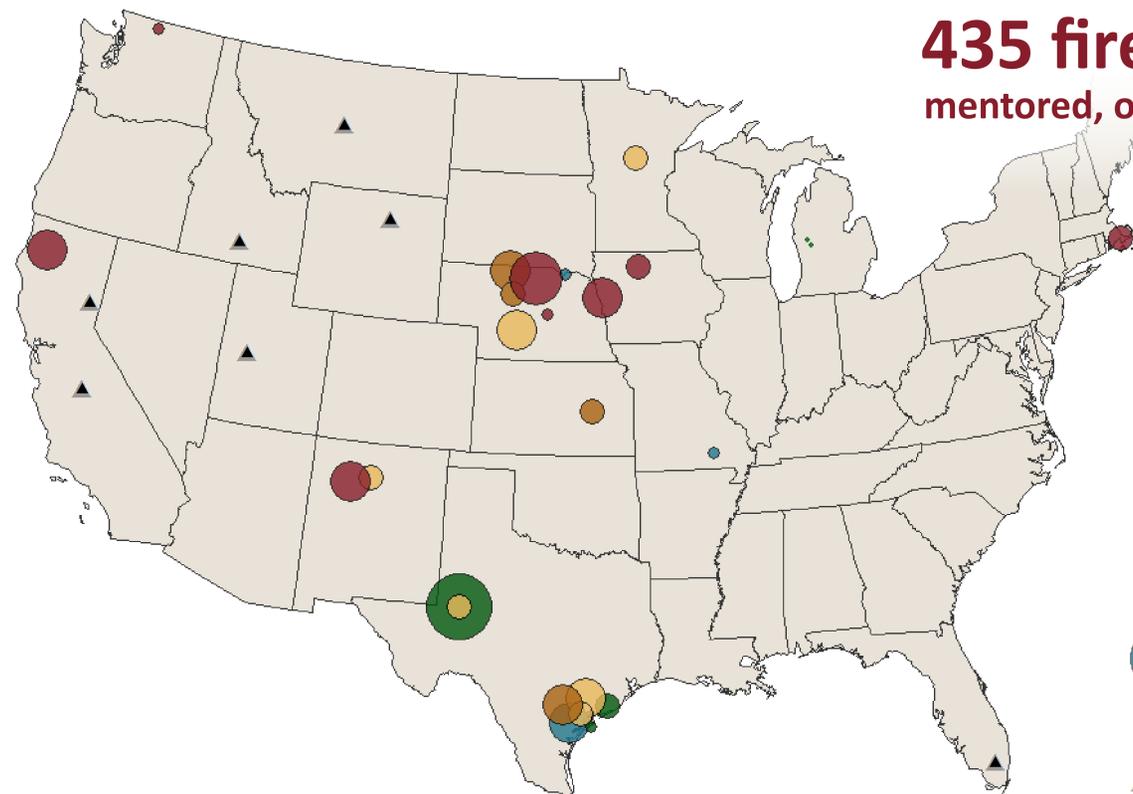
ABSTRACT

Through the Fire Learning Network (FLN)—a project of The Nature Conservancy, US Forest Service and Department of the Interior agencies—partners have worked together to develop strategies to scale up the use of fire over 10 years. One such strategy has been the development of an innovative live-fire, experiential learning program called prescribed fire training exchanges (TRES). Originating in the Great Plains, where most land is privately owned and firefighting capacity is limited, we have built upon the age-old ethos of neighbors helping neighbors. We have expanded the concept to include not only a rancher in Nebraska helping a neighbor across the fence, but also neighbors as far-flung as the US Forest Service in California or the Ministry of the Environment in Spain, working together to advance the use of fire globally.

Since 2008, the FLN has delivered tens of thousands of acres of prescribed fire treatments and provided learning and evaluation opportunities for wildland fire practitioners from around the country and globe through the TRES. In addition, local managers have enhanced their skills with prescribed fire—and contributed local knowledge to the events and to the larger fire community. Host units have received capacity boosts, with a large temporary crew of qualified workers to help with large or complex burn events.

Benefits of this integrated approach to practical fire training include:

- Sharing a broad spectrum of knowledge of fire ecology and means for restoring fire to landscapes
- Ability to tailor events to meet host unit needs
- Improved fire practitioner preparation for the multitude of challenges in an increasingly complex fire environment
- Reciprocal opportunities for fire practitioners to work on higher level qualifications
- Partnership development through working together on the fire line
- Integration of hands-on learning into academic programs for college students in fire and resource management



Learning Exchanges...

... foster sharing knowledge of fire ecology and the means for restoring fire to landscapes



Mixing It Up

A key feature of prescribed fire training exchanges is that people from numerous places and organizations bring diverse experiences and perspectives to the work at hand. Those who come from afar are of course exposed to new landscapes and methods—but hosts and cadre also gain insights by discussing what is familiar to them with people from sometimes vastly different backgrounds, and fresh eyes.

← A September 2010 exchange in New Mexico was conducted in Spanish, with participants from Chile, Costa Rica and Mexico joining local practitioners from the Santa Fe National Forest, Valles Caldera National Preserve and National Park Service, as well as students from the University of Idaho and inmates from a correctional facility work program.

... are tailored to meet host unit needs



Crossing Boundaries for Big Burning

Many landscapes that need fire lack sufficient local capacity to conduct burns efficiently. Hosting 10-45 personnel for an exchange can be daunting, but by sharing hosting among neighbors, significant amounts of prescribed fire can be completed.

← A trainee from Fort Riley Army Depot in Kansas burns late into the evening at a 2011 exchange based at the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve. Over two weeks, crews completed 3,700 acres of ecological burns on private, state and federal lands in the area.



A Little Capacity Boost

On a smaller scale, individuals can also be placed in exchange assignments that meet their training needs and provide a loan of valuable skills to the host unit.

← In an assignment similar to an internship, this fire ecologist and USDA Forest Service heli-rappel crewmember from Idaho worked for 18 days with The Nature Conservancy's Michigan chapter. She spent two days on unit prep, and eight days on the fire line (four as a FIRBt, and four as a FF trainer/mentor). She also led the development of protocols for a monitoring program and assisted with prescribed burn plan preparation.

... improve practitioner preparation to meet the challenges of increasingly complex fire environments



The Next Generation of Ranchers and Farmers

In addition to providing vital on-the-ground experience for fire professionals, training exchanges engage private landowners. Mentoring the next generation of farmers and ranchers helps promote and maintain a culture of fire use on private lands.

← Logan Govier, a fourth-generation farmer completed the basic NWCG training needed to integrate with Conservancy and agency crews through the self-study CD course, then worked 2,183 acres of prescribed fire during a March 2010 exchange near Broken Bow, NE. The following week, he applied the lessons learned and led several more burns on private lands with his father and other neighbors.

... provide reciprocal opportunities for fire practitioners to work on qualifications



Burn Boss & Incident Commander Trainees

Firefighters at training exchanges have opportunities to work on position task books needed to establish their credentials.

← Prescribed fire events have given 45 agency burn boss trainees and 112 single-resource boss trainees from across the country experience and evaluations needed for professional advancement.

Since wildfire experience is required for prescribed fire burn boss qualifications, partnerships that provide opportunities for the required experience are important. Partnerships built through prescribed fire training events have to date enabled 25 Conservancy staff to serve as trainees on wildfires. →



... develop partnerships through working together

Building a Network

Relationships made on the fireline build a more connected community, which leads to further opportunities for joint work.

A South Africa State Parks ecologist and → a fire manager from the Conservancy's Massachusetts chapter who worked together at a March 2012 exchange in Nebraska are now planning a similar training program in South Africa.



Engaging Volunteer Fire Departments

VFDs add much-needed capacity in regions where landowners are reluctant to burn on their own. In Iowa's Loess Hills, four active VFDs offer prescribed fire services, which raise money to support their departments and provide valuable experience for newer firefighters.

← The Mondamin VFD participated in a 640-acre multi-agency burn at the Little Sioux Scout Ranch in the Loess Hills in October 2011. The VFD participants had received classroom training from the Iowa DNR the previous winter, and were able to put their prescribed fire skills to work in the field on the burn. →

... integrate hands-on learning into academic programs for college students

University Students

Training exchanges provide students with hands-on prescribed fire experience that complements their academic work. The University of Idaho now offers course credits for students who participate in a spring break exchange. In 2012, 20 students from the University of Idaho, 5 from Colorado State University, 5 from the Yale School of Forestry, and 2 students from UC-Berkeley took part in training exchanges.

Thirteen students from the University of Idaho helped conduct burns on the Conservancy's Niobrara Valley Preserve in March 2010. Fellow crew members included contract firefighters from California and Spain, and staff from USDA Forest Service and state agencies. →



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The Fire Learning Network (FLN) is a cooperative program of the Forest Service, Department of the Interior agencies—Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service and National Park Service—and The Nature Conservancy. The partnership has a ten-year proven track record of helping to restore our nation's forests and grasslands and to make communities safer from fire.

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