

FIRE LEARNING NETWORK

The U.S. Fire Learning Network (FLN) is a system of landscape-scale collaborative projects that work to accelerate the restoration of fire-adapted ecosystems at local, regional and national scales. Collaborative planning, implementation, adaptive management and sharing lessons learned are at the core of the Network. Participants have a common desire to learn and to share their results and insights with one another; this allows landscape teams to more rapidly overcome barriers to sustainable and integrated ecological, social and economic solutions for the long-term conservation of these important lands.

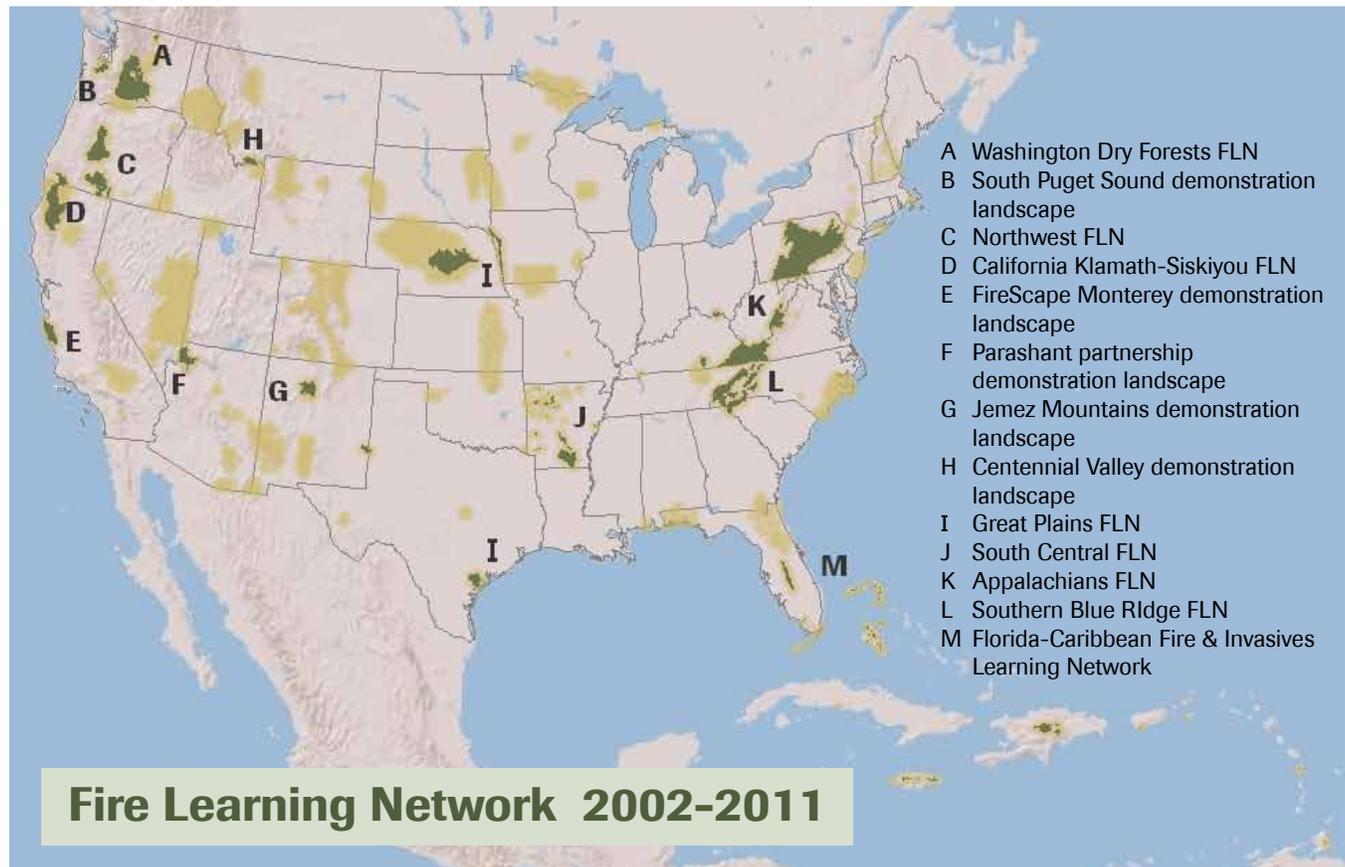
A Network of Landscapes

Landscapes in the FLN typically are large areas—the median landscape size is over 400,000 acres—and include multiple ownerships and numerous stakeholders. Landscapes coalesce around ecological challenges such as altered fire regimes or invasion by non-native species, and work toward culturally and ecologically appropriate, integrated, all lands restoration. Participants form their own partnerships

to become networks and define their own landscape boundaries and priorities. Network partnerships include federal, state, local and tribal governments, along with private landowners and community members.

“We’re now looking at long-term, landscape planning from a different perspective ... looking at our district at a landscape level rather than just specific areas or specific treatments ... and started a really strong collaboration process.”

*FLN landscape leader, BLM,
on what the FLN has changed*

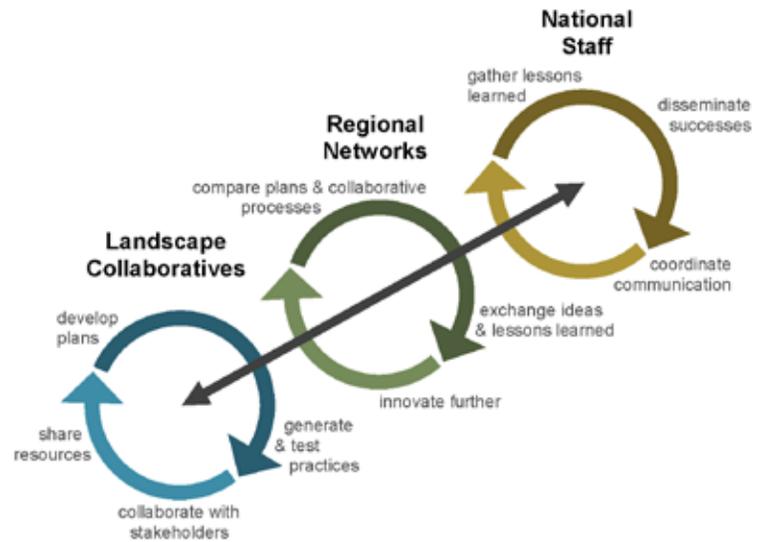


The FLN Model

In the Fire Learning Network process, participants establish collaborative goals, determine actions, and direct resources to gain the greatest conservation results. It is an iterative and adaptive approach that operates at multiple scales and has been employed successfully in diverse geographic and cultural settings. This approach and the methods to implement it allow the practitioner community to share experience and learning across geographies and to improve integrated fire management practices over time. Among other things, Fire Learning Network products facilitate effective NEPA preparation at multiple scales and fire management plan development, contribute to forest and land management plans, guide state and county plans, and inform policy.

As the FLN has evolved and landscape partnerships have matured, some landscapes have applied collaborative methods to address restoration challenges in a variety of other ways as well.

Advanced networks have developed new models to scale up efforts with their partners, and to address larger issues than those originally conceived. For example, the South Central FLN has scaled-up at the state level, developing close partnerships with state agencies and laying the groundwork for significant state and federal restoration funding that they are using to implement restoration treatments across the state of Arkansas. The Centennial FLN in Montana is addressing the issue of uncertainty and lack of agreement over optimal treatment types by setting up restoration demonstration projects across several habitat types; their workshops are a series of field visits, where partners discuss and learn together, with the evidence right before them. Across the Great Plains grasslands, as in many places, skilled fire capacity is a limiting factor; landscapes in the Great Plains FLN, working with FLP training staff, have reached out to local fire practitioners like ranchers and volunteer fire departments



The FLN's planning methods are based on the Open Standards for Conservation. According to research conducted by Bruce Goldstein and colleagues, the Network can best be conceived of as a multiscalar process of iterative adaptive management.

Diagram adapted from Butler, W. H. and B. E. Goldstein (2010). "The US Fire Learning Network: Springing a Rigidity Trap through Multiscale Collaborative Networks." Ecology and Society 15(3):21.

and engaged them, finding the overlap between the needs of ecological burning for habitat, ranching, and community safety. And in the Jemez Mountains, numerous projects, from climate change adaptation to salamander research, are integrated in the same landscape; the FLN provides the core of collaborative relationships that feed—and link—many of these projects.

FLN Numbers ~ 2002-2010

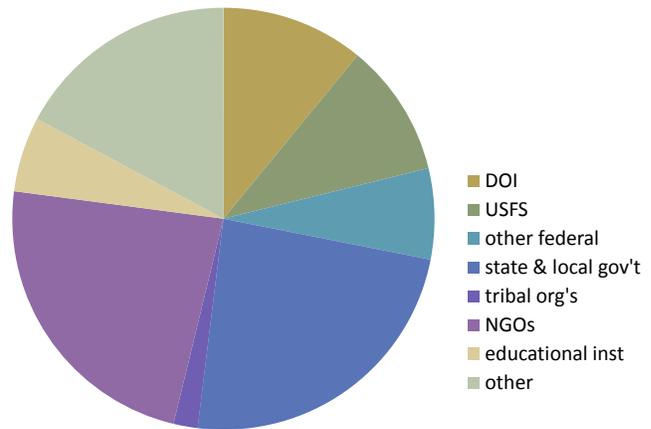
- 15** regional networks
- 157** landscapes
- 150** million acres
- 1020** partners
- 39** states (plus Puerto Rico)
- 5** foreign countries
- 1** innovation project
- 177,000** acres treated
- > \$5.5** million in restoration & other funds leveraged (includes CFLRP)



Partners from eight landscapes in six countries dealing with the interactions between fire and invasive species at an herbicide demonstration at the Florida-Caribbean regional workshop

Connection and Credibility

Regardless of the details of how an FLN functions or what its goals are, when asked to reflect, leaders and partners had very similar comments on what is most valuable about the FLN. The process is good. The science is good. Financial support is always helpful. But two words that came up repeatedly were “credibility” and “connection”—being part of a larger whole. This was expressed in many ways. For some, working in remote areas, having a community of like-minded people to be a part of, to bounce ideas off, to have as a resource makes the difference between success and frustration. For others, working at small NGOs, the credibility that comes from being connected to the FLN gives a foot in the door with the bigger players in the area. For others, working at large agencies, it assures stakeholders that plans and decisions have come from a well thought out, collaborative process. And for many, workshops and other gatherings provide a reminder of what can be done—what others have, in fact, accomplished—and participants return home recharged and ready to tackle the seemingly impossible one more time. The bottom line is that people engage in the Network because it helps them more quickly and effectively achieve their goals, and gives them credibility with their partners, the public and funding entities. Eight years in, the FLN’s record of getting large projects to implementation without litigation remains intact.

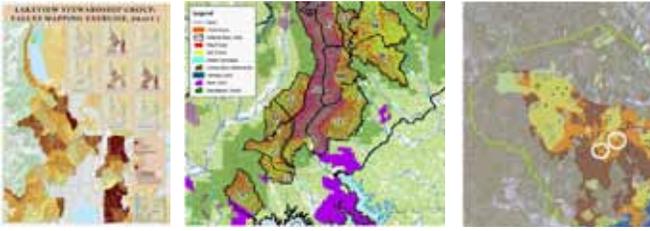


FLN Landscape Partners, by Affiliation

FLN landscapes engage partners from a wide variety of organizational affiliations, including federal and state agencies; county and other local governments; a range of NGOs; volunteer fire departments; timber, ranching and other commercial enterprises and universities



Regional workshops serve as a forum for partners from several landscapes in the region to come together once or twice a year for peer review of products and learning exchange. The national Fire Learning Network also convenes workshops where partners can share knowledge across regions and gain access to new restoration tools, products and ideas. From left: Refugio-Goliad Prairie, TX field tour at national FLN workshop; Two-Hearted River, MI team at LANDFIRE-Efroymson workshop; Southern Blue Ridge regional workshop field tour



From left: The Northwest FLN led collaborative mapping of values at risk; the maps, on which dark areas indicate high agreement among stakeholders that restoration treatments are needed to protect valued aspects of the landscape, have been used by federal agencies to prioritize treatments. A multi-agency team in the Southern Blue Ridge FLN created a model for prioritizing burn units on one ranger district; the work inspired several other landscapes to adapt the model locally. Refugio-Goliad Prairie developed aerial survey methods to identify and document private burning on the 664,000-acre landscape; this allows FLN partners to determine where their own burns will have the greatest effect, track progress across the entire landscape and provide scientific rationale for programs they support

“[It] was a really empowering experience, where we were able to be among peers from across the country that were doing good things with regard to fire. And that there were things that were happening in the Appalachians that were dictated by the same federal regulations that are managing the work in our area. So there was a lot of cross-pollination of ideas, but also a chance to ... to come to some collective vision of how we could work together to try and evolve fire policy in our region to reflect some of the positive changes that are going on nationally.”

FLN landscape leader, western US on attending a national FLN workshop

The Research

The FLN and its promise and progress as an approach to meeting large-scale conservation challenges were the subject of five peer-reviewed publications by Bruce Goldstein, Will Butler and colleagues.

“We conclude that the FLN nurtures expertise in ecological fire restoration and collaborative planning by linking multi-stakeholder collaboratives to regional communities of practice. Moreover, this linkage creates and sustains a network of collaboratives that amplify the potential for fundamental change in the culture and practice of fire management.”

Key Findings on the FLN

Nurtures and Distributes Expertise

- low cost
- customized, contextually relevant
- collaborative and topical

Grows and Sustains Collaborative Networks

- catalyzes new collaborative processes
- promotes network expansion
- distributes expertise

Amplifies Potential for Change

- fosters cohesion without disabling control
- inspires collective action
- magnifies impact on policy and institutions

Goldstein, B. E., & Butler, W. H. (2009). “The Network Imaginary: Coherence and Creativity within a Multiscalar Collaborative Effort to Reform U.S. Fire Management.” *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*. 52(8):1013-1033.

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Butler, W. H., & Goldstein, B. E. (2010). “The US Fire Learning Network: Springing a Rigidity Trap through Multi-scalar Collaborative Networks.” *Ecology and Society*. 15(3):21.



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