

# “Neighbors Helping Neighbors” Spreads like Wildfire

## Innovative Learning Exchanges Across the Great Plains Develop Prescribed Fire Professionals

It is widely agreed that America has a **serious fire problem**. In the Great Plains, as in much of the country, we don't have enough of the right kind of fire. Nationwide, an estimated 120 million acres are in immediate need of restoration—far more than can be accomplished by any of us working alone.

The **Fire Learning Network** helps people work together and increases the capacity needed to help ecosystems and communities become more resilient. The FLN supports public-private landscape partnerships that engage in collaborative planning and implementation, and provides a means for sharing the tools and innovations that help them further increase the scale and pace of their restoration efforts.



Landscapes in the Great Plains FLN have developed a program of **Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges** that bring together numerous practitioners in events that increase the capacity to use prescribed fire in both the short and long term. The exchanges create opportunities for agency prescribed fire practitioners to work on their professional credentials by gaining experience, completing assignments in position task books and receiving evaluations from qualified trainers. Most finish the events with not only enhanced credentials, but a broader, more holistic perspective on prescribed fire, encompassing far more than fuels reduction. In addition, private land managers participate in the exchanges to develop their ability to use prescribed fire—and contribute local knowledge to the events and to the larger fire community. The host units get a capacity boost, with a large temporary crew of qualified workers to help with large or complex burn events.

### Connecting People ...



**Burn Boss & Incident Commander Trainees**  
Firefighters at training exchanges have opportunities to work on the position task books needed to establish their credentials.  
← Prescribed fire events have given 35 agency burn boss trainees and 90 single-resource boss trainees from across the country experience and evaluations needed for professional advancement.  
Since wildfire experience is required for burn boss qualifications, and the Conservancy doesn't fight wildfires, partnerships that provide opportunities for the required experience are important. The partnerships built through prescribed fire training events have enabled 20 Conservancy staff to train with federal fire wildfire crews. →



**Volunteer Fire Departments**  
Volunteer fire departments can 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 hands-on fire 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.



**The Next Generation of Ranchers and Farmers**  
Training and 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 (with the fifth generation sleeping in a bassinet at home) 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, Nebraska.  
← The following week he led several more burns on private lands with his father and other neighbors.



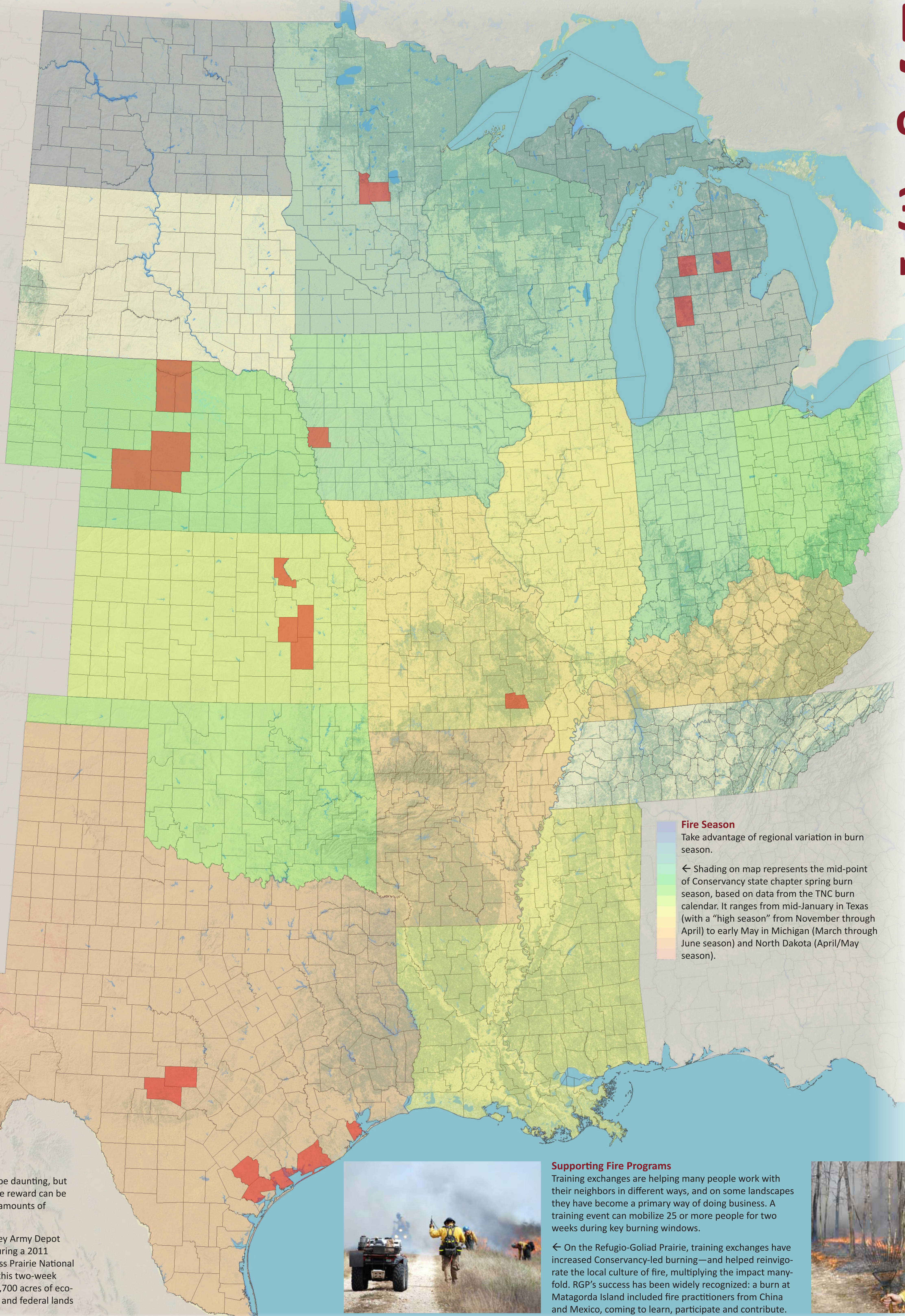
**Private Contractors**  
Treating contractors as an integral part of the fire community has led to the development of significant relationships with several fire and forestry companies.  
← Grassland burning can be deceptively dangerous. Experienced private firefighters led this multi-partner burn at the Conservancy's Matheson Preserve along the Colorado River in Moab, Utah. The 12-foot flames in burrush are rejuvenating the wetland for various amphibian and waterfowl species.



**University Students**  
Training exchanges provide students with hands-on experience as prescribed fire crew members (RXCM), complementing their academic work in resource management fields. The University of Idaho now offers two 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, 2 students from UC-Berkeley and one from the Yale School of Forestry will be taking part in training exchanges.  
← Thirteen students from the University of Idaho were on the crew that conducted burns on the Conservancy's Niobrara Valley Preserve in March 2010. Fellow crew members included contract firefighters from California and Spain, and staff from Forest Service and state agencies.



**Crossing Boundaries**  
Hosting 10-45 personnel can be daunting, but hosting can be shared, and the reward can be the completion of significant amounts of prescribed fire.  
← A trainee from the Fort Riley Army Depot burns late into the evening during a 2011 exchange based at the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve. Over the course of this two-week exchange, crews completed 3,700 acres of ecological burns on private, state and federal lands in the area.



**Fire Season**  
Take advantage of regional variation in burn season.  
← Shading on map represents the mid-point of Conservancy state chapter spring burn season, based on data from the TNC burn calendar. It ranges from mid-January in Texas (with a “high season” from November through April) to early May in Michigan (March through June season) and North Dakota (April/May season).



**Supporting Fire Programs**  
Training exchanges are helping many people work with their neighbors in different ways, and on some landscapes they have become a primary way of doing business. A training event can mobilize 25 or more people for two weeks during key burning windows.  
← On the Refugio-Goliad Prairie, training exchanges have increased Conservancy-led burning—and helped reinvigorate the local culture of fire, multiplying the impact manyfold. RGP's success has been widely recognized: a burn at Matagorda Island included fire practitioners from China and Mexico, coming to learn, participate and contribute.



**Boosting Capacity**  
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 firefighter worked 18 days for the Conservancy's Michigan chapter. An accomplished western firefighter and ecologist, 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 contributed to the development of protocols for a monitoring program and assisted with prescribed burn plan preparation.

burning & learning together for four years has resulted in

**56,000 Acres**  
of ecological prescribed fire

**300 fire practitioners**  
mentored, on-the-ground experience

Landscapes that need fire also **need people who use fire**. Sharing skills, people, equipment and other resources lets more people use fire.

### How ...

The most important step is to **just start**. Discard all the reasons it can't be done. Creating a multi-day burn event with learning objectives takes multiple leaders, working together. Announce early. Build a roster—everyone is a trainee, everyone is a mentor. Two-week assignments are good. Plan for a lot of burn days; plan for Plan B. Orient crews to the local ecology, economy and culture.

**Commit to the task.** Your partners—the participants—should be committed, too; let them know that. **Thank** the dozens of people who help you get there.

If this is too much, don't develop a full training exchange event. But **define a new normal**, where operational sharing of staff and resources across agency lines is routine, and goes beyond your (old) normal distance and time limits.

### Expect the unexpected.



From heat exhaustion to snow, alligators to tornadoes, it has happened at a training exchange. Being prepared for the unexpected is important to making a good training event. Having back-up activities and remaining patient has proven to be very important. Good contingency plans provide opportunities in the face of adversity—whether it is alternate places to burn when the sun turns to snow, or a nearby media expert who can give a crash course in prescribed fire outreach.

**Dot your i's, cross your t's.** The Conservancy's **Fire Management Manual** enables the use of fire for Conservancy and partner organizations. National training standards, MOUs and/or national agreements can provide an extra layer of understanding. Be sure to consult with your State Fire Manager before burning with your neighbor.

**Build it and they will come.** Your partners, like you, need help accomplishing their prescribed burns. If you show up to help them, they will show up and help you. And everyone will get closer to where they're going, faster.



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