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FLN



DISPATCH

Emerging Lessons From
The Fire Learning Network

U.S. FIRE LEARNING NETWORK

A cooperative project of the The Nature Conservancy, Interior Departments and the USDA Forest Service, the network was created in 2002. Part of the larger joint program, **Fire, Landscapes and People: A Conservation Partnership**, which includes education and training components, the network operates at both national and local levels to overcome barriers to reducing hazardous fuels build-up and restoring fire-dependent ecosystems.

<http://tncfire.org/usfln>

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Conserving and restoring private lands in coastal Texas has much in common with conservation and restoration in northeast Mexico, despite the two countries' cultural and political differences: Cattle ranching and hunting drive many decisions related to land use on both sides of the border. Ranchers and conservationists alike are concerned about the spread of woody plants into valuable grasslands. There are globally imperiled animals in both Mexico and Texas that depend on open grasslands to survive. And in both places fire is a known, but under-utilized tool for restoring native prairies to benefit both wildlife and cattle.

These issues and more were discussed March 3–4, 2009, during an FLN-sponsored learning exchange in Victoria, Texas. Seven Conservancy staff members and agency partners from Tamaulipas and Nuevo Leon, Mexico traveled to the Refugio-Goliad Prairie (RGP) and toured private ranches where the Conservancy's Texas chapter is working with partners to restore much of this vast landscape using fire. The group also visited the Conservancy's Mad Island Marsh preserve where they observed a 200-acre controlled burn.

The effort was organized by Ray Guse, the RGP landscape lead, and Jorge Uribe, Gulf of



Fire exchange participants from the U.S. and Mexico discuss brush control techniques and rotational grazing while visiting a ranch near Victoria, Texas.

—Photo by Jorge Uribe

PARTNERS INVOLVED IN FIRE AND RESTORATION WORK IN THE REFUGIO-GOLIAD PRAIRIE, TEXAS AND NORTHERN MEXICO.

Refugio-Goliad Prairie

- Coastal Bend Prescribed Burn Assn.
- Coastal Prairies Cons. Initiative
- Natural Resources Cons. Service
- Texas Parks and Wildlife
- The Nature Conservancy
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Northern Mexico

- BIDA, A.C.
- El Cielo Biosphere Reserve
- Natl. Commission of Forestry
- Natl. Commission for Nat. Protected Areas
- Pronatura Noreste
- Tamaulipas Environmental Agency
- The Nature Conservancy

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Mexico Conservation Program Coordinator for The Nature Conservancy in Mexico. Uribe's program includes Laguna Madre, a one-million-acre federal protected area with a mosaic of coastal wetlands, freshwater ponds and native grasslands where the Conservancy and others are working with local landowners to develop private land conservation techniques, much as the partners at RGP have been doing for the past eight years. It also includes El Cielo Biosphere Reserve that contains a variety of ecosystems, including pine and oak forests.

The project at RGP is ambitious. The prairie covers 664,000 acres, and the Conservancy and others are aiming to create and maintain at least 200,000 acres of good quality, connected habitat for the critically endangered Attwater's prairie chicken. The biggest task is combating encroaching shrubs. The region's most common brush species—huisache and mesquite—are not easy to control. In addition to mechanical and/or chemical treatments, a series of burns is typically needed to restore brush-laden prairie to a healthy state. Once restored, the prairie requires fire every four years or so if it is to remain suitable for prairie chickens. Guse estimates that since 2003 more than 61,000 acres have been burned at least once, a tremendous accomplishment given recent droughts, and the

need to coordinate closely with many different land owners who are managing their land for multiple uses.

Land managers from Mexico saw first-hand the results of the RGP partners' intensive brush control efforts. In northeast Mexico most restoration work is still in its infancy, and in many places the immediate priorities are re-vegetating land that has been overgrazed, and replacing non-native forage species such as buffelgrass with native grasses. "Campesinos regularly use fire to prepare the land for cropping" says Uribe, "but fire has not been used for conservation purposes. Fortunately, Mexico did recently amend its laws and now recognizes fire as a legitimate land management tool."

This exchange was the third in which Conservancy staff and partners from Texas and northern Mexico have met formally to discuss expanding the use of fire as a conservation tool in order to benefit both sides of the border. With the change in Mexican law, the transfer of knowledge and skill between the two countries will become even more valuable. As a next step, Conservancy staff members from southeast Texas are planning a reciprocal visit to Laguna Madre and El Cielo Reserve in the near future.

The Nature Conservancy
Protecting nature. Preserving life.

