



Fire Training Exchanges

Connecting People and Programs for Impact



From left to right: Davis Mountains Preserve, Texas © The Nature Conservancy/Blane Heumann; Gulf coastal plains, Texas © The Nature Conservancy/Jeremy Bailey; Mad Island Marsh Preserve, Texas, © The Nature Conservancy/Clay Carrington

Who Participates?

The following agencies and organizations have participated in one or more training exchanges since the program was initiated in 2008:

- The Nature Conservancy
- USDA Forest Service
- Bureau of Land Management
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- Bureau of Indian Affairs
- State fire control agencies
- County conservation boards
- University of Idaho
- Landowner associations
- Metro fire departments
- Pheasants Forever

Fire Training Exchange Principles

- Align learning and training objectives of each trainee with planned events
- Support and accelerate specific FLN landscape objectives
- Teach principles of Integrated Fire Management, conservation and high reliability organizing
- Conduct on-the-ground fire operations and adaptive management
- Strengthen partnerships to accelerate the restoration of fire-adapted ecosystems
- Promote cross-fertilization and innovation through peer learning and after-action evaluation

In 2008 a federal agency fire training coordinator asked Nature Conservancy staff for help in addressing a persistent and widespread shortage of qualified prescribed burners. In response, Nature Conservancy Fire Learning Network (FLN) and training staff worked with the field to design a novel program that provides training and learning opportunities for wildland fire professionals while at the same time furthering the long-term objectives of FLN landscapes. Although exchanges can take different forms, a typical exchange matches the specific learning objectives of individuals from several states and organizations with a fire event. These two- to three-week events include daily burning and give trainees a concentrated dose of prescribed fire experience as well as exposure to new people, places and techniques.

A wildland firefighter typically starts his or her career as a Type 2 Basic Firefighter after taking four training courses and passing a fitness test. To advance from there, and to perform more advanced roles (known as positions) on the fire line such as an Engine Boss, one

must complete additional coursework in addition to satisfactorily performing certain tasks during an actual fire incident. These tasks, and one's performance completing them, are documented in a Position Task Book (PTB).

Training exchanges are deliberately designed to create opportunities for trainees to work on their PTBs and receive evaluations from qualified trainers. The host units, meanwhile, get qualified workers to help with large or complex burn events. The experience goes way beyond working on PTBs, however. For example, hosts typically schedule activities to demonstrate both fire's role in landscape conservation and local fire management practices, teach trainees about local fuel types and fire ecology, and integrate fire practitioners with local stakeholders and natural resource managers.

When designed with the larger community in mind, training exchanges ensure that ecological objectives are consistent with the local socioeconomic context and also help rekindle a culture of fire in the host communities. (Working with local people to develop solu-



A trainee practices a wet line tactic during a January 2010 training exchange in West Texas
 © The Nature Conservancy/Blane Heumann

Meanwhile, training exchange staff help host units build flexibility into their events, and establish clear expectations that ensure that all parties are committed to learning from one another. Each trainee is coached to set realistic but challenging learning objectives and then receives timely feedback on his or her performance. In the spirit of adaptive management, the host unit also solicits detailed feedback from both trainees and training exchange staff.

In some cases trainees travel across the country to take advantage of opportunities to burn in new fuel types during what is typically their off season. The most popular and ambitious burn exchanges take place in states such as Texas where conservation-related burning is scheduled practically year-round. The Fire Training Exchange program provides limited financial assistance to each host unit to offset some expenses.

A Record of Success

In 2008 there were three exchanges that resulted in the treatment of almost 8,000 acres. In 2009, about 14,300 acres were treated over the course of seven exchanges. The program engaged 28 federal and non-federal trainees in 2008, and 75 in 2009.

FLN staff have been somewhat surprised by the level of community support and engagement that often surrounds these activities. Organizers of an upcoming exchange in Nebraska are planning to hold a community meeting in conjunction with that event. Several other exchanges have garnered positive media coverage.

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tions to fire issues that take into account social, economic and ecological factors is called *Integrated Fire Management*.) Exchanges also facilitate the two-way sharing of new ideas and innovations and strengthen ties among participating fire organizations. These outcomes are the hallmark of the exchange program.

A Matchmaking Service for the Wildland Fire Community

These fire training exchanges are gaining recognition as premier training opportunities. Federal and state firefighters—many of whom have been on plenty of suppression incidents but need more experience conducting prescribed fires—in particular have been quick to take advantage of the exchange program. By focusing their efforts on FLN landscapes—multi-stakeholder collaboratives that are working toward a common vision that includes restored ecosystems—training exchange

staff ensure that they are having an impact in places that are positioned for long-term success.

The program is really a specialized matchmaking service for FLNs and the wildland fire community. It works because training exchange staff have relationships with a variety of organizations and are skilled at putting the right people and programs in touch with one another. All burns associated with the program meet National Wildland Fire Coordinating Group guidelines and requirements. Having common standards is critical to ensuring compatibility between the host and trainees.

How Does it Work?

Organizers commonly circulate an announcement several months in advance of an exchange that specifies the number and type of trainee assignments available (e.g., two Type 2 Burn Bosses, four Engine Bosses and three Firing Bosses). A recent 14-day training exchange in Texas was filled within hours of a recent announcement.