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# 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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Judy Dunscomb has a vision: for the Appalachian FLN to spark the same revolution in the use of fire to manage eastern hardwood forests that the Tall Timbers Research Station catalyzed for longleaf pine ecosystems in the 1920s and 30s.

“Appalachian ecoregions contain both fire-adapted and fire-dependent species, yet the complexity of these diverse oak-hickory and pine dominated systems has hamstrung our ability to articulate ecological management objectives,” says Dunscomb. The region’s long history of human land use enhances this complexity. Still, new studies at multiple sites show a consistent pattern of frequent fire from prehistoric times into the 20th century, leading most land managers to conclude that the region’s forest communities and species evolved with fires caused by lightning. Native Americans and European settlers.

Fire exclusion since the 1930s is believed to have allowed shade tolerant trees like red maple and white pine to replace critical mast species with significant timber value — such as oaks and hickories — and fire-adapted pines like pitch and table mountain. Understory herbs have declined, while mountain laurel and rhododendron have expanded their niches. These shrubs can



Warm Springs Mountain, part of the Alleghany Highlands landscape, Virginia.

—Photo by Byron Jorjorian

## LANDSCAPES OF THE APPALACHIAN FIRE LEARNING NETWORK

### *Demonstration Landscapes*

- Alleghany Highlands (VA)
- Cumberland River (KY)
- Shawnee Forest (OH)
- Southern Blue Ridge (NC)

### *Learning Sites*

- Pine Creek Historic Forest Restoration Proj. (OH)
- Shenandoah NP, Blackrock Project (VA)
- West Branch Wilderness (PA)

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burn intensely during drought, and some climate models predict warmer and drier conditions that could further heighten the risk of wildfire just as numerous second homes are being built in the mountains. The goal of the Appalachian FLN is to restore the diversity of native Appalachian pine-oak-hickory forests to the benefit of wildlife, timber management and wildland homeowners.

Things coalesced in 2006 when Dunscomb — a Nature Conservancy senior conservation scientist — organized a meeting to help develop fire management approaches for Warm Springs Mountain, a 9,000-acre preserve in Virginia’s Alleghany Highlands. To her surprise, ecologists and land managers from several Appalachian states participated. Dunscomb recalls, “there was a clear demand for a forum to figure out how to restore Appalachian forests.”

The group looked to the FLN structure to provide that forum. Today, Appalachian Network landscapes cover portions of nine states, from Pennsylvania south to Georgia. The four most mature sites or “demonstration landscapes” are paired up with “learning sites” on track to be promoted to demonstration status in 2009. “We’re hoping two years will give the learning sites time to build a program and get ready to drive a team through the process,” says Dunscomb.

The network has already sparked a great deal of collaboration at both local and regional scales. The rapid pace of the network and the distance between sites, however, were creating workload and logistical challenges for some of the partners involved in the Southern Blue Ridge (NC) landscape. As a result, the Southern Blue Ridge team recently formed a separate group that will meet independently of the larger network. The two groups plan to maintain close learning ties by sharing online lectures and designating ambassadors to attend each group’s workshops.

Over the past year the four demonstration landscapes — including stakeholders from a host of federal and state agencies and private groups — have clarified their species and ecosystems of interest and compiled information on threats. They’ve also developed both “key ecological attributes” for species and ecosystems of interest, and maps depicting current vegetation and desired ecological conditions. With their goals and threats identified, network partners will have better tools to develop and test a variety of management strategies that meet the needs of agencies and landowners. The Network will be an avenue to share those results, help identify the most effective tools and accelerate the restoration of ecosystems.

