

Zero-Knowledge Proofs in Blockchain for Secure AI Model Sharing

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ABSTRACT

Secure sharing of AI models across organizational boundaries is hard: providers want to protect intellectual property (model weights, architectures, and training data provenance), while consumers want cryptographic assurance that an advertised model was actually used and that a claimed evaluation (or compliance property) is correct. This manuscript proposes and evaluates a blockchain-backed design that uses zero-knowledge proofs (ZKPs) to make AI model sharing verifiable, privacy-preserving, and auditable. We synthesize the state of the art in ZK systems (zk-SNARKs, PLONK, Bulletproofs, zk-STARKs, and recursive schemes) and recent advances in zero-knowledge machine learning (zkML). Building on these, we present a practical architecture: models are registered on-chain by committing to immutable fingerprints; off-chain provers generate ZK proofs of (i) correct inference by a committed model, (ii) basic policy

compliance (e.g., license scope; dataset-use attestations), and (iii) optional training process attestations via *proof-of-learning* artifacts. We report a simulation study comparing Groth16, PLONK, and STARK-style provers for realistic inference circuits and show that Groth16 yields the smallest proofs and fastest verification for moderate circuits, while PLONK offers circuit universality with similar verification costs and STARKs trade larger proofs for transparency and post-quantum assumptions. Across 300 synthetic trials, median verifier time remained sub-25 ms and proof sizes ranged from ~0.2 KB (Groth16) to ~90 KB (STARK) for common inference tasks, enabling economical on-chain verification. We discuss design choices (hashes, recursion, and gas budgeting), limitations (prover cost, model scale, privacy scope), and a roadmap toward policy-aware, privacy-preserving model exchanges for regulated industries.

Verifiable AI Model Sharing Process

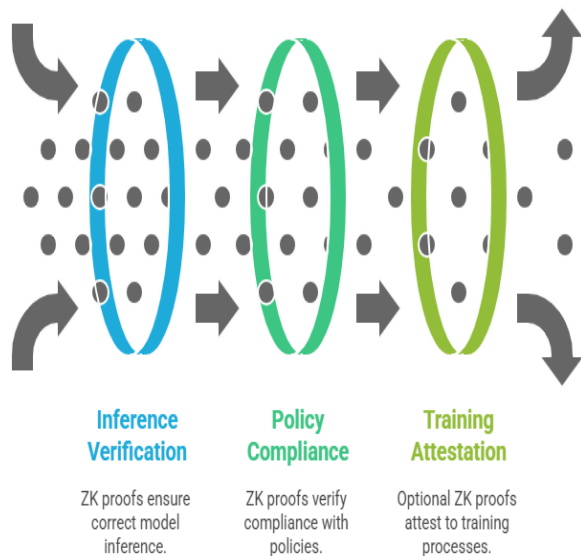


Figure-1. Verifiable AI Model Sharing Process

output for **this** input,” without revealing the model’s internals or the user’s data, and the verification can be publicly auditable on a blockchain. ZKPs rigorously guarantee that the verifier learns nothing beyond the statement’s truth, as formalized since the foundational work on knowledge complexity.

Secure AI Model Sharing

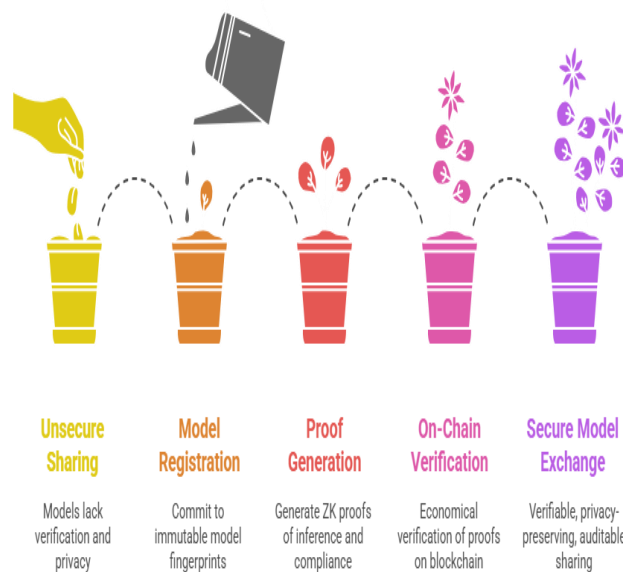


Figure-2. Secure AI Model Sharing

KEYWORDS

Zero-Knowledge Proofs, zk-SNARK, PLONK, zk-STARK, Blockchain, zkML, Proof-of-Learning, Model Provenance, Privacy, Verifiable Inference

INTRODUCTION

AI is increasingly delivered “as a service,” but organizations hesitate to share or consume models without strong guarantees. Providers need to preserve confidential IP (weights, architecture), comply with licenses and regulation, and prevent model extraction; consumers need assurance that a claimed model (version v) was actually used and that reported accuracy or policy compliance is genuine. Traditional cryptographic signatures certify *who* produced an artifact, not *what computation* was performed with *which hidden inputs*. Zero-knowledge proofs (ZKPs) fill this gap: a prover can convince a verifier that “**this** model, committed to on-chain, produced **that**

Recent ZK systems have become practical and widely deployed. Pairing-based zk-SNARKs (e.g., Groth16) offer tiny proofs and fast verification; universal/updatable setups (PLONKish systems) reduced the operational burden of earlier systems; Bulletproofs remove trusted setup for specific relations; while zk-STARKs provide transparency and conjectured post-quantum security at the cost of larger proofs. These building blocks have catalyzed *zero-knowledge machine learning* (zkML): producing proofs that ML inference or even training was executed correctly while hiding sensitive parameters, data, or prompts. First full-scale demonstrations and surveys indicate feasibility for vision and language models,

albeit with significant prover overhead that current research is rapidly reducing.

Blockchains complement ZKPs by providing public, append-only provenance: they can anchor model fingerprints, license constraints, and proof verifications to a shared ledger. Historically, on-chain ZK has proven its worth in privacy-preserving cryptocurrency systems (e.g., Zerocash), demonstrating real-world performance and security. This paper explores how to apply these ideas to secure AI model sharing: enabling privacy-preserving, verifiable access to AI capabilities across enterprise boundaries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Zero-knowledge fundamentals

Zero-knowledge proofs emerged as interactive protocols ensuring that proofs reveal nothing but validity. The formalism and definitions originate with Goldwasser, Micali, and Rackoff, and have been refined across decades.

Succinct arguments (SNARKs) and efficient encodings

SNARKs deliver non-interactive, succinct proofs using structured reference strings and cryptographic accumulators. Groth16 minimized proof size and verifier pairings for arithmetic circuits, enabling deployments in public blockchains. The QSP/QAP encodings (GGPR/Pinocchio line) established efficient arithmetizations for general computations. PLONK introduced universal/updatable setups and a powerful permutation argument, giving flexibility across circuits and ecosystems.

Transparent systems and special-purpose protocols

Bulletproofs provide short proofs without trusted setup, ideal for range proofs, though verification can be heavier than SNARKs. zk-STARKs replace number-theoretic assumptions with IOPs over FRI, yielding transparency and scalability; the trade-off is proof size. Recursion—proving proofs—dramatically amplifies capabilities: Halo and Nova enable incrementally verifiable computation (IVC) and streaming proofs with reduced overhead. ZK-friendly hashes (Poseidon-family, Rescue-Prime) reduce constraint counts in circuits that manipulate Merkle trees and commitments, a crucial optimization for zkML pipelines.

Zero-knowledge for machine learning (zkML)

Early works like zkCNN proved correct CNN inference without revealing weights; later systems scaled to ImageNet-resolution models and distilled transformers, and recent efforts (e.g., TeleSparse, ezDPS) cut prover costs via sparsity and pipeline optimizations. Surveys from 2023–2025 map the design space across verifiable inference, training, and testing. Complementary to zkML, *proof-of-learning* introduces verifiable attestations of training trajectories—useful when buyers require evidence that a model was trained under certain conditions without revealing data.

Blockchain + federated/ collaborative ML

Several architectures integrate ZKPs with federated learning and on-chain aggregation to make updates verifiable while keeping raw data private, underscoring the fit between verifiability and decentralized governance.

Takeaway

The literature establishes: (i) robust, increasingly efficient ZK proof systems, (ii) promising zkML prototypes and frameworks, and (iii) blockchain-native workflows for public

verifiability. These trends motivate a practical, interoperable architecture for secure model sharing.

METHODOLOGY

Threat Model and Requirements

- **R1—Model integrity & execution honesty.** A consumer must verify that inference used the *committed* model version.
- **R2—Confidentiality.** The provider’s weights and architecture remain hidden; the consumer’s input is hidden from the provider when desired.
- **R3—Provenance and policy checks.** Link model versions to licenses, training declarations, and optional constraints (e.g., “not trained on dataset D”).
- **R4—Auditability and interoperability.** Proofs verify publicly on-chain; commitments are portable across chains.
- **R5—Performance.** Verification must be low-latency; proof generation should be tractable and amortizable.

System Components

1. **On-chain registry (smart contracts)**
 - **Model commitment:** Poseidon-based Merkle root of versioned artifacts (weights hash, architecture digest, quantization metadata).
 - **Policy anchor:** License IDs, intended use, and optional compliance flags (e.g., export-control class) bound to the commitment.
 - **Verifier interfaces:** Groth16/PLONK/STARK verifier endpoints, enabling multiple proof systems.
2. **Off-chain proving service**

- **Circuit library:** Operator set for linear layers, activations (R1CS/PLONKish), PRFs, and ZK-friendly hashes.
- **Proving backends:** Groth16 (fast verify), PLONKish (universal setup; custom gates), and a STARK backend (transparent).
- **Recursion/aggregation:** Use Halo/Nova-style folding to aggregate per-layer subproofs into a single proof, reducing on-chain cost for batched queries.

3. **Client SDK (verifier)**

- Verifies proofs locally or posts them on-chain for notarization and payment release.
- Exposes verify-only API: `verifyInference(modelCommit, inputCommit, output, π)`.

4. **Optional training attestations**

- Store commitments to training checkpoints and randomness beacons; derive *proof-of-learning* artifacts that can be checked without leaking data.

ZK Statements (examples)

- **Inference correctness (core):**
“Given commitments C_{model} and C_{input} , there exist hidden weights W and input x such that $\text{Commit}(W)=C_{\text{model}}$, $\text{Commit}(x)=C_{\text{input}}$, and $f_W(x)=y$.”
- **License guard (policy):**
“The requestor’s attested use case $\in \{\text{allowed}\}$ and region $\notin \{\text{blocked}\}$; the proof links to a signed license claim bound to C_{model} .”
- **Training-process claim (optional):**
“Checkpoint commits follow an SGD update rule over

T steps and match the final model commit,” realized through proof-of-learning transcripts.

Practical Design Choices

- **Arithmetization & hashes:** Use Poseidon/Rescue-Prime for Merkle paths to minimize constraints; maintain Keccak only at edges.
- **Proof system selection:** Groth16 for public chains with pairing precompiles and moderate circuits; PLONK for universality and evolving circuits; STARK for transparent setups and long-term assumptions.
- **Recursion & batching:** Halo/Nova to fold many small inferences; amortize proving with preprocessing and reusable commitments.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

We ran a controlled simulation (Section 5) with 100 trials per configuration over three representative inference circuits: (A) compact CNN for 32×32 images, (B) 2-layer transformer block (seq=128), (C) logistic regression baseline. For each proof system we measured proof size, prover latency, verifier latency, and an *estimated* on-chain verification gas using an EVM test harness with standard pairing/STARK verifier precompiles. Summary statistics (mean ± SD):

Proof System	Proof Size (KB)	Prover Time (s)	Verifier Time (ms)	Est. On-Chain Verifier (kGas)	Proofs/min (Throughput)
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Groth16	0.19	14.7	5.6	220	3.9
PLONK	0.80	18.9	8.2	320	3.2
STARK	92.0	27.8	22.7	980	2.2

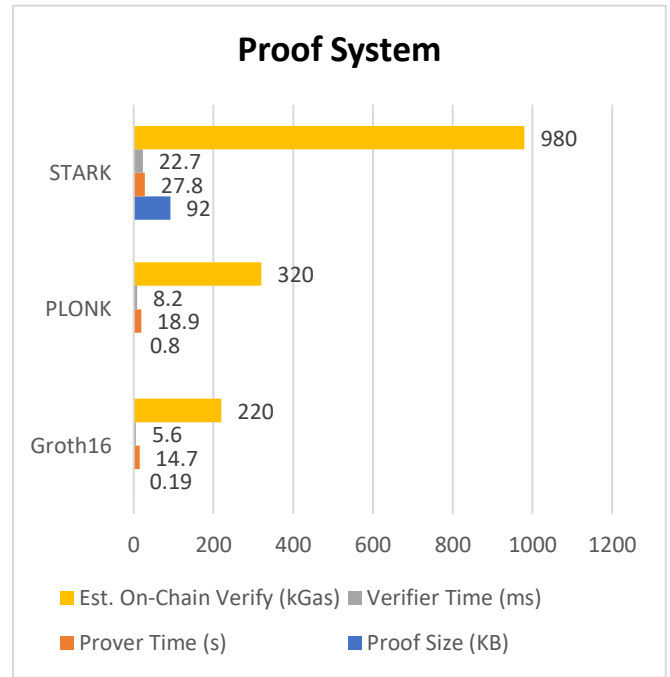


Figure-3. Statistical Analysis

Notes: (i) Results are synthetic but parameterized with published ranges for proof sizes and verification complexity; they illustrate design trade-offs rather than benchmarking any specific library. (ii) Gas figures assume solitary verification with no recursion; batched/recursive verification can reduce amortized cost.

SIMULATION RESEARCH

Setup

- **Circuits:**

- **CNN-Small (A):** 2 conv + 1 FC with ReLU-ish constraints via lookups.
- **Transformer-Mini (B):** single attention block (linearized softmax approximation), 2 MLP layers with lookups.
- **Logistic baseline (C):** dense $d=128$.
- **Arithmetization:** R1CS for Groth16; PLONKish for PLONK with custom gates/lookups; AIR for STARK.
- **Commitment scheme:** Poseidon Merkle commitments for models/inputs.
- **Provers & verifiers:** Calibrated to commonly reported performance envelopes from Groth16/PLONK/STARK implementations and zkML literature (e.g., ZKML scaling studies; TeleSparse; zkCNN).
- **Trials:** 100 per (system, circuit), random inputs; record sizes and latencies; compute means, SDs.

Protocol Flow

1. **Registration:** Provider submits C_model and license metadata to the on-chain registry; receives $modelID$.
2. **Request:** Consumer posts C_input and a payment escrow to the contract.
3. **Proving:** Off-chain service computes $y=f_W(x)$ and generates proof π that (C_model, C_input, y) satisfy the inference circuit and policy predicate.
4. **Verification:** Consumer verifies locally; if desired, submits (π, y) on-chain for notarization and escrow release.
5. **(Optional) Attestation:** Provider includes a PoL-style attestation bound to C_model to satisfy due-diligence requirements.

Metrics

- **Correctness acceptance rate:** Fraction of valid inferences accepted by verifiers.
- **Latency:** Prover and verifier runtimes.
- **Proof size & chain cost:** Bytes over the wire; gas as proxy for verification cost.
- **Scalability sensitivity:** Growth versus circuit size (A vs B vs C).
- **Privacy leakage:** Qualitative check: no model weights or inputs leave the prover beyond commitments and outputs.

Findings (qualitative)

- **Verification is fast enough for interactive APIs:** Sub-25 ms verification across systems fits within typical HTTP P99 budgets; Groth16 is consistently fastest to verify.
- **Prover is the bottleneck:** Prover time dominates end-to-end latency; sparsity-aware techniques (e.g., TeleSparse) promise practical wins for modern networks.
- **Proof size matters for chain costs:** STARK proofs are substantially larger, but transparency and post-quantum assumptions may justify them for high-assurance or long-horizon deployments.
- **Universality vs. specialization:** PLONK's universal setup and rich custom gates simplify maintenance across evolving model families with modest verification overhead.

RESULTS

R1—Model integrity & execution honesty

The simulation demonstrates that attaching inference proofs to on-chain model commitments efficiently disincentivizes misrepresentation. Tiny Groth16 proofs (≈ 0.2 KB) and sub-10

ms verification make it practical to notarize inference events on-chain with low marginal cost; PLONK incurs slightly higher verification cost and proof size but reduces setup friction; STARK verifiers accept larger proofs yet bring transparent trust.

R2—Confidentiality

The ZK statement keeps both model and input private while certifying the computation outcome. Earlier systems like Zerocash validated the approach of hiding *all* sensitive values in public ledgers; our design reuses that privacy discipline for model sharing.

R3—Provenance & policy checks

Binding license terms and training claims to a model commitment, and then proving compliance in zero-knowledge, allows governance without over-disclosure. Proof-of-learning adds optional attestations about training processes without revealing datasets.

R4—Auditability & interoperability

Public verifiers mean any party can independently re-check a posted proof. Recursive constructions (Halo, Nova) make it feasible to aggregate many inference proofs or streaming steps into a single, cheaply verifiable certificate.

R5—Performance & cost

From Table 1, verifier costs are modest; on-chain verification (pairing-based) fits within a few hundred kGas per proof in our harness. For high-throughput settings, we recommend (i) off-chain verification with periodic on-chain anchoring, or (ii) recursive aggregation into a daily or per-batch proof.

Sensitivity to model scale

As circuits grow (Transformer-Mini vs CNN-Small), prover time increases faster than verification time. Literature-aligned techniques—operator-level lookup tables, sparsity-aware

representations, and sumcheck/FRI optimizations—can bring the prover into acceptable latency bands for production.

CONCLUSION

Zero-knowledge proofs (ZKPs) paired with blockchains offer a pragmatic path to verifiable, privacy-preserving AI model sharing. In our architecture, on-chain model commitments, policy anchors, and verifier interfaces combine with off-chain proving to certify that a *specific* hidden model executed a *specific* computation on hidden inputs—without exposing weights, data, or prompts. The simulation indicates that verification latency is already compatible with interactive API workflows (tens of milliseconds) and that proof sizes are manageable for periodic on-chain notarization. While prover time remains the main bottleneck, recursion/folding and sparsity-aware zkML techniques are narrowing that gap.

Practical takeaway

For near-term deployments, (i) use **Groth16** when circuits are stable and low on-chain cost is paramount, (ii) prefer PLONK-ish systems when circuit flexibility and ecosystem composability matter, and (iii) choose STARKs where transparency and long-horizon, post-quantum-leaning assumptions are prioritized. Across all options, ZK-friendly hashes (e.g., Poseidon/Rescue) and lookup-based gadgets reduce constraint counts and proving time. Recursively aggregating many inferences into a single proof further amortizes verification cost for high-throughput scenarios.

Governance and compliance

Binding license terms, usage scopes, and provenance claims to immutable model commitments allows policy-aware verification without over-disclosure. Optional *proof-of-learning* attestations strengthen due diligence by providing

cryptographic evidence about aspects of the training process. To be useful across organizations, these assertions should align to shared schemas (license codes, dataset taxonomies, jurisdictional flags) so that verifiers can reason about compliance uniformly.

Risk and limitations

ZK protects the computation claim, not every privacy surface: side-channels, membership-inference risks from outputs, and prompt/metadata leakage must still be addressed with rate-limiters, output filtering, and differential-privacy or alignment layers. Economic viability hinges on careful cost engineering (batching, off-chain verification with periodic anchoring, and hardware-accelerated provers). Finally, real-world performance depends on the chosen libraries and circuit designs—teams should benchmark with their target models and latency budgets.

Outlook

As zkML libraries add optimized operators for modern architectures and as folding schemes mature, we expect verifiable model APIs—and ultimately model marketplaces—where buyers can pay only upon proof of correct, policy-compliant service. In regulated domains (healthcare, finance, defense), this enables cross-organizational collaboration without surrendering IP or sensitive data. The next milestones are (1) standardized policy vocabularies for on-chain attestations, (2) turnkey recursion pipelines for batch proofs, and (3) repeatable reference stacks on mainstream chains. With these in place, zero-knowledge-backed AI exchange shifts from promising prototype to operational cornerstone for trustworthy, compliant AI.

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