

Community Wildfire Protection Planning in the West

A Status Report



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Council of Western State Foresters

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Acknowledgements

The Council of Western State Foresters is comprised of the seventeen directors of the State and Territorial Island forestry agencies of the West. The mission of the CWSF is to promote science-based forest management that serves the values of society and ensures the health and sustainability of western forests.

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The National Association of State Foresters (NASF) is comprised of the directors of the state and territorial forestry agencies and the District of Columbia. Through public-private partnerships, NASF seeks to discuss, develop, sponsor and promote programs and activities which will advance the practice of sustainable forestry, the conservation and protection of forest lands and associated resources and the establishment and protection of forests in the urban environment.

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Community Wildfire Protection Planning in the West

Executive Summary

Since the passage of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA) in 2003, communities have been charged with becoming active partners in their own protection from wildfire. Drafting Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPP) in collaboration with state and local officials, communities identify prominent sources of fire risk, summarize structural ignitability concerns, and prioritize areas for fuels reduction treatment. The main purpose of CWPPs is for localities to improve their wildfire mitigation capacity and to work with government agencies to coordinate efforts to identify high fire risk areas and prioritize areas for mitigation, suppression, and emergency preparedness management. States have a key role to play in the formulation of CWPPs, as communities may look for long-term guidance from outside experts.

The idea of community protection from wildfire is not new. Many communities have engaged in a variety of fire planning efforts, such as the long-standing Fire Safe program in California. Still, federal attention to community protection took a leap forward in 2000 with the enactment of the National Fire Plan (NFP). Building upon this interest in fire management, Congress directed and the Western Governor's Association responded by collaborating with a group of stakeholders to produce *A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and the Environment: A 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy* in 2001, and its companion document, the *Implementation Plan*, in 2002. In 2002, President Bush's Healthy Forest Initiative (HFI) included fire management in a broad effort to improve the health of our nation's forests and rangelands. The Healthy Forest Restoration Act (P.L. 108-148, 2003) captured many of the goals of HFI and made them statutory. Expedited fuels reduction and community safety are two of the most important objectives codified in HFRA, and Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs) are singled out as the best way for communities to engage in the process (Section 103(d)(2)).

Defining a "community at risk" (CAR) has been problematic. Following Congressional direction, each State, in consultation with Tribes, compiled a list of communities in the vicinity of federal land that are at high risk from wildfire. Lists were published in the Federal Register (66 Fed. Reg. 753, January 4, 2001); language there acknowledges that states' lists were compiled using different criteria reflecting the varying needs and values of the individual states, and are considered incomplete and in need of ongoing updates. As a result, most agree that there is a great deal of variability in the lists as states have defined community and risk differently. Many have noted that there is ultimately little value in developing a national list as the geographic and socio-political variables differ so vastly in each state.

The CWPP process also varies considerably between states. Many individual Plans cover more than one community, and in some cases one community may have sub-divisions that have their own Plans. There is not a one-to-one ratio of Plans to communities

protected. States differ in the resource availability for CWPP development, and individual communities have tremendous variability in development and implementation capacity, including level of citizen skill and awareness, finances available, and access to technology such as Geographic Information System (GIS).

Despite these challenges in Plan development and fire mitigation capacity, the West is clearly moving toward increased community protection through the CWPP process. Identifying local concerns and prioritizing protection activities not only serves to attract agency attention to fire management needs, but the very process of Plan development tends to increase community capacity and a heightened awareness of local fire risk and responsibility. All states are currently compiling or have already finalized their CAR list, and many have begun regular updates to keep the list current. Every state has begun the process of creating CWPPs although rates of completion vary considerably. Across the West, 329 CWPPs have been completed and approved as being in accordance with HFRA guidelines. Countless additional Planning documents serve to protect communities and counties. As communities and states begin to share success stories and lessons learned, progress will strengthen; already, templates and field guidance have been developed by a number of non-profit, government, and research entities to facilitate the process.

Many who have been involved in CWPP development are quick to note that in many cases the process is itself a success. Collaboration among local landowners, local governments, land management agencies and the State for fire planning also creates lasting relationships that extend beyond the immediate task. These networks are invaluable for information sharing and community capacity building. Throughout the West, there is enthusiasm for improving collaborative efforts, protecting communities, and developing strong fire management planning processes.

I. Introduction

Since the passage of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA) in 2003, communities have been charged with becoming active partners in their own protection from wildfire. Drafting Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPP) in collaboration with state and local officials, communities identify prominent sources of fire risk, summarize structural ignitability concerns, and prioritize areas for fuels reduction treatment. The main purpose of CWPPs is for localities to improve their wildfire mitigation capacity and to work with government agencies to coordinate efforts to identify high fire risk areas and prioritize areas for mitigation, suppression, and emergency preparedness management. States have a key role to play in the formulation of CWPPs, as communities may look for long-term guidance from outside experts.

This update begins with a chronological summary of relevant fire policy and community protection legislation. It then briefly summarizes ongoing challenges with definitions and risk assessment, and then moves to the process of CWPP development. Next, a number of challenges associated with CWPP development and implementation are explored. The bulk of this report is a Western state-by-state summary of progress toward CWPP completion and community protection.

II. Data Interpretation

Given the wide variety of definitions and processes utilized by states, state results do not lend themselves to state-to-state comparison and therefore meaningful contrasts cannot be drawn. Many individual Plans cover more than one community, and in some cases one community may have sub-divisions that have their own Plans. There is not a one-to-one ratio of Plans to communities protected. Therefore, it is difficult to translate the data on Plan completion into levels of community protection. Adding to the complexity, some communities in several states have fire plans in place that do not meet HFRA standards; those communities may well be “protected” beyond what the following data indicates.

III. Context & Background

A. Legislative Foundations

The idea of community protection from wildfire is not new. Many communities have engaged in a variety of fire planning efforts, such as the long-standing Fire Safe program in California. Still, federal attention to community protection took a leap forward in 2000 with the enactment of the National Fire Plan (NFP). The NFP offered a long-term strategy for fire management that emphasized community involvement and identified states as full partners in the effort across all boundaries.

Building upon this interest in fire management, Congress directed and the Western Governor's Association responded by collaborating with a group of stakeholders to produce *A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and the Environment: A 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy* in 2001, and its companion document, the *Implementation Plan*, in 2002. Goal number four in the 10-Year Strategy is to "promote community assistance", with an emphasis on building community capacity and developing stronger incentives for community-level fire mitigation work.

Communities are urged to conduct risk assessments and develop fire management plans, although at the time of publication those plans were not yet called CWPPs.

In 2002, President Bush's Healthy Forest Initiative (HFI) included fire management in a broad effort to improve the health of our nation's forests and rangelands. The Healthy Forest Restoration Act (P.L. 108-148, 2003) captured many of the goals of HFI and made them statutory. Expedited fuels reduction and community safety are two of the most important objectives codified in HFRA, and Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs) are singled out as the best way for communities to engage in the process (Section 103(d)(2)). The HFRA directs the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service and the United States Department of Interior (USDOI) Bureau of Land Management to "consider" communities' priorities when developing hazardous fuels reduction projects. Communities therefore have two incentives to develop CWPPs: improved fire protection and attraction of federal dollars.

While there is no dedicated line item in the federal budget to support the development of CWPPs, communities and state forestry entities have found creative sources of funding to bolster their efforts. Most prominently, the State Fire Assistance (SFA) program, part of the US Forest Service's State and Private Forestry budget, directs federal funds to State agencies for work on community assistance and fire mitigation. These funds often arrive in the form of competitive cost-share grants, and many communities have leveraged those dollars for CWPP creation. Still, several State Foresters are adamant that funding is inadequate for the task and urge an increase in federal funding for the development of CWPPs.

B. Defining Communities at Risk

Defining a "community at risk" (CAR) has been problematic. Elements of "risk" might include structural flammability, accessibility, community capacity, forest health, and innumerable other factors. Following Congressional direction, each State, in consultation with Tribes, compiled a list of communities in the vicinity of federal land that are at high risk from wildfire. Lists were published in the Federal Register (66 Fed. Reg. 753, January 4, 2001); language there acknowledges that states' lists were compiled using different criteria, and are considered incomplete and in need of ongoing updates.

The National Association of State Foresters (NASF) Field Guidance on CAR (June 2003) establishes a common definition for communities at risk and a process model for prioritization of communities. A community is defined as "a group of people living in the same locality and under the same government." This definition allows for discretion, however, and states have developed different definitions for a "community at risk". Nebraska, for example, assigned some level of risk to all of its communities so that every Nebraska town in the state's GIS database is technically considered a CAR. Other states, such as New Mexico, included much smaller communities than Nebraska did, but did not place every community on the state's CAR list.

C. CWPP Development

The language in HFRA gives communities a great deal of flexibility in preparing their Plans. Minimum requirements for a completed plan are:

- *Collaboration.* The CWPP must be developed collaboratively by local and state government representatives, in consultation with federal agencies and other interested parties;
- *Prioritized Fuels Reduction.* A CWPP must identify and prioritize areas for hazardous fuels reduction treatments and recommend the types and methods of treatment that will protect one or more at-risk communities and essential infrastructure.
- *Treatment of Structural Ignitability.* A CWPP must recommend measures that homeowners and communities can take to reduce the ignitability of structures throughout the area addressed by the plan.

Three entities must approve a completed CWPP: the relevant local government, the local fire department, and the state body responsible for forest management.

IV. CWPP Challenges

Most states report significant challenges in developing CWPPs for all CARs. As a starting point, creating an initial nationwide CAR list for the 2001 Federal Register was challenging for many states, as they had to decide how to approach questions of scale and relative risk. As a result, most agree that there is a great deal of variability in the lists as states have defined community and risk differently. Some contend that that there is ultimately little value in developing a national list.

The CWPP process also varies considerably between states. States such as Arizona are completing county-wide or regional CWPPs, while all of Washington's Plans to date have covered single communities. The result is that 11 CWPPs in Arizona cover 58 CARs, while 9 CWPPs in Washington cover only 9 CARs. Nevada had a consulting firm complete all of its 17 county-based CWPPs, while Utah has had little interaction with consultants and instead completed 100 locally-generated and community-based plans.

Many note that it has been very difficult to get communities to take the lead in the process, and the State ends up with a primary leadership role. Other states have struggled to make sense of a myriad of different fire planning documents that have been completed over a number of years at varying scales. Likewise, reconciling data from different sources has proven problematic for many states, as they try to make federal, state, and local data compatible. Getting signatures from all the fire chiefs in a single county can be a major challenge, especially when the county is large. Although CWPP “approval” does not require formal signatures, many Plans do include them; several states report being held up as they await signatures from all the necessary entities.

Capacity issues continue to underlie many of these implementation challenges. States differ in the resource availability for CWPP development, and individual communities have tremendous variability in development and implementation capacity, including level of citizen skill and awareness, finances available, and access to technology such as Geographic Information System (GIS). The local capacity to implement a CWPP is vital lest the CWPP becomes just “another plan sitting on the shelf.” Some states report frustration with passive communities that seem overly willing to let others do their planning for them. When that happens, the state may find itself over-extended and limited by staff and resource availability.

Virtually all States report a common expectation in their communities: a completed CWPP will automatically lead to a stream of federal funding. This expectation is troubling for several reasons. First, it is inaccurate; policy language urges agency planners to prioritize work recommended in CWPPs, but does *not* require them to conduct all of the projects suggested by communities. Second, when communities expect funding to follow their plans, they tend to write plans that cannot be implemented without outside support. The plans, then, become something less than optimal or realistic as communities invest in the analysis and process, but are unable to implement their ideas without agency involvement. Third, as agencies seek to build lasting trust with local entities through the collaborative process, they may be undermined when communities realize their expectations for federal funding will likely not be met.

Despite these challenges in Plan development and fire mitigation capacity, the West is clearly moving toward increased community protection through the CWPP process. Identifying local concerns and prioritizing protection activities not only serves to attract agency attention to fire management needs, but the very process of Plan development tends to increase community capacity and a heightened awareness of local fire risk and responsibility.

V. State Stories

This section summarizes the progress of each Western state. Initial results show that over 300 CWPPs that meet HFRA standards have been completed in the West, providing community protection for over 2,000 Communities at Risk. Several states have also completed community fire plans that don't yet meet HFRA requirements, thereby providing additional protection that is not reflected in the data presented here.

Direct comparisons between states will not provide meaningful information. States have used a diversity of CWPP and CAR methods and definitions, adapting the tools to fit their individual state laws and requirements. These differences are not necessarily a problem, but do present a clear obstacle to numerical comparisons between states. Likewise, the number of CWPPs completed in each state should not be calculated as a percentage of the total number of CARs in the state to indicate a level of protection. Many CWPPs cover more than one community, and many states have utilized such different definitions of "communities" that calculating percentages would be misleading.

Still, data in this section offers a snapshot of tremendous progress and shows that states have made significant strides toward community protection. Much work is still to be done. The diversity of approaches taken by states underscores the fact that there are multiple pathways to successful community fire planning.

A. Alaska

Using the State of Alaska Commerce & Economic Development community database, Alaska identified 379 CARs. The state then gave each community a 1-4 rating to assess its relative risk; 73 ranked at the highest level. Many of the plans currently in progress will include multiple communities, although all plans will be community or borough based. At the time of this writing, 18 plans were in progress.

For more information: www.borough.kenai.ak.us/sbb

B. Arizona

Federal and State wildland firefighting agencies defined 159 CARs in the state. Arizona then ranked all of its communities along a high-medium-low rating scale to assess risk. CWPPs in the state are both city and county based, depending on how local planning groups chose to define the community. Several individual plans in the state cover more than one community. The 11 completed plans include 71 identified CARs and a substantial number of other communities not identified on the CAR list.

For more information: www.azstatefire.org

C. California

California identified 1,264 CARs. The State had nearly 40 fire protection plans that were completed prior to the Healthy Forests Restoration Act. Since then, the State reports 56 HFRA-compliant plans, and estimates that approximately half of their communities are covered by a plan. The earlier plans, many of which were completed under California Department of Forestry guidelines, are now being converted to CWPP format. Plans are written for the community, county, and “fire unit” levels. California began by identifying non-federal lands based on census data, and then overlaid vegetation and flame length estimates to determine relative risk.

For more information: www.cafirealliance.org
www.fire.ca.gov

D. Colorado

Colorado is in the process of updating its 2001 CAR list, where it identified 1,731 CARs based on a combination of the Geographic Names Information Source and the Colorado Red Zone map of relative fire risk. The State has 72 community protection plans, of which 13 are HFRA compliant. At least an additional 20 of those existing plans are currently under revision to become HFRA compliant. While the State is encouraging community-level plans, there are some qualifying plans at the fire protection district and/or county levels that cover more than one community.

For more information: www.southwestcoloradofires.org/prevention/fireplans.htm

E. Hawaii

Hawaii is currently finalizing its CAR list, which currently contains 185 CARs, and finalizing corresponding maps. All of its CARs have been ranked low to high for risk. The CAR list includes incorporated towns and much smaller units called “zones”. One CWPP has been completed and approved to date. The state, in conjunction with non-profit organizations, is leading up the CWPP effort.

F. Idaho

Idaho used town names from the State of Idaho map and cross-referenced those names with zip codes to come up with 500 CARs. Next, the State ranked its communities along a scale of risk from low to high. The state estimates that 95% of its counties have completed fire management plans, but only 42 meet HFRA standards. The counties are now charged with making their existing plans HFRA compliant.

For more information:

www2.state.id.us/lands/nat_fire_plan/county_wui_plans/index.htm

G. Kansas

Kansas is currently working with its 2002 CAR list, which identified 49 CARs, and it will be updating the list in the future. All counties in the state complete a master fire plan and conduct an internal assessment as part of the process; in many cases, counties find low risk to communities. Six (6) CWPPs have been completed; none have yet been

formally approved. Existing county plans will also be updated and made HFRA compliant.

H. Montana

Montana defined communities to include much smaller units such as subdivisions. For this reason, although the State only has 120 incorporated towns, it came up with 622 CARs. Each CWPP covers more than one community. Montana has 19 CWPPs completed and approved, and 23 CWPPs currently in progress. When those have been approved, 46% of total CARs in the State will be covered by a Plan.

I. Nebraska

Nebraska used the State's Geographic Information Systems (GIS) database to identify CARs, and came up with a total of 593. This number includes units smaller than a town, but not as small as a subdivision. The State estimates that its 2 completed & approved Plans already account for 22% of high risk communities. The State recently completed its CAR list and will soon have corresponding maps available.

J. Nevada

Nevada began by listing Wildland-Urban Interface communities with the Federal Register, and is now adding ranching communities to its CAR list, bringing the total to more than 250. Ranking CARs on a risk scale from low to extreme, Nevada created 17 county-based CWPPs and hired a single contractor to do all the risk assessments through funding provided by the Department of the Interior's Rural Fire Assistance program. The state now has all of its communities covered by completed, HFRA-compliant plans.

K. New Mexico

New Mexico began with 2000 census data, and included small units such as subdivisions in its CAR list. The State now updates its CAR list annually, and currently has a total of 224 CARs, ranked low-medium-high for risk. New Mexico estimates that its 6 completed & approved Plans account for 40% of its CARs. The Plans are a mix of

county and city level. Other plans exist in the state and are now being converted to HFRA compliance.

For more information: www.emnrd.state.nm.us/emnrd/forestry/FireMgt/Fire.htm

L. North Dakota

North Dakota defined its CARs by identifying counties, for a total of 53. The State has done almost of its planning so far at the county level with one (community level plan) exception. The State has 2 completed and approved Plans. All counties have been ranked low, medium and high for risk and future plans are likely to be completed by county. Currently, 16 additional CWPPs are in progress and are scheduled to be completed at the end of the year.

M. Oregon

Oregon began by using 2000 census data to determine population densities across the State as one component of the statewide risk assessment process to identify Communities At Risk (CAR). The State now has 566 CARs and is involved in planning at both the county and community levels. All communities have been ranked low-medium-high for risk. Of 36 total counties in the state, 30 have begun the planning process, and 28 CWPPS have been completed. Integration of local knowledge throughout the CWPP development is used to identify communities within counties. Some counties have completed FEMA Pre-disaster Natural Hazard Mitigation plans and are integrating the CWPP process into the Wildfire chapter. Protection plans that were developed prior to HFRA have been reviewed and meet HFRA minimum requirements.

For more information:

http://egov.oregon.gov/ODF/FIRE/FirePlans.shtml#Community_Wildfire_Protection_Plans_CWPP

N. South Dakota

South Dakota is still working with its 2001 Federal Register list which identified 124 CARs. The state has completed all of its Plans at the county level with the exception of Rapid City, which did its own city plan. Seven CWPPs have been completed and approved, and 6 more Plans are currently in progress, representing 19 additional

communities. All the CARs in the State are being ranked on a scale from 1-9 for risk, and will be displayed in three categories: high, medium and low.

O. Utah

Utah allowed its communities to define themselves, and came up with a list of 600 CARs. These communities were then ranked along a 1-12 scale for risk, and finally divided into three broad risk categories: high, medium, and low. The State has 100 CWPPs completed and approved. Most of the Plans so far have been done at the community level although some Plans cover more than one community. There are approximately 50 plans currently in progress.

For more information:

www.ffsl.utah.gov/firemgt/WUI/ComAtRisk/CommunitiesAtRisk.php

P. Washington

Washington's CAR list was created after a statewide risk assessment in 2003 and the state plans to update it this year. The current list has 214 CARs. Twelve CWPPs have been completed at the community level covering 30 communities, but county level plans are now being encouraged. Two county level plans covering 34 communities are complete, and two county plans covering forty communities are in progress. By the end of 2006, 140 communities should be covered in HFRA-compliant CWPPs. Washington actively promotes the Firewise Communities/USA recognition program to CARs that are not adjacent to federal land. Eleven communities have achieved Firewise recognition, so the level of community protection might not be captured by only the CWPP data. These Plans are now being brought into HFRA compliance where practical.

For more information: www3.wadnr.gov/dnrapp5/website/fmanfire/viewer.htm

Q. Wyoming

Wyoming operates with a very broad definition of a community, and includes subdivisions. Their CAR list is comprised first of counties and then the communities located within their boundaries. The State therefore does not have a full list of CARs, but is working off an amalgamation of the Federal Register and existing county plan lists.

With 188 CARs on the current list, Wyoming has 13 completed and approved Plans. Plans are being completed at the county level, with over 77% of listed CARs covered by those Plans.

VI. Summary and Next Steps

All states have either completed or are updating their CAR list, with many undertaking regular updates to keep the list current. Every state has begun the process of creating CWPPs although rates of completion vary considerably. Across the West, 334 CWPPs have been completed and approved as being in accordance with HFRA guidelines. Countless additional Planning documents, when implemented, will serve to protect communities and counties. As communities and states begin to share success stories and lessons learned, progress will strengthen; already, templates and field guidance have been developed by a number of non-profit, government, and research entities to facilitate the process.

Funding for CWPP development continues to generate attention in Washington, DC. Several newly-introduced bills specify increased authorizations for collaboration and community-level planning. Performance measures are another area of policy influence, and preliminary revisions to the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy suggest measuring agencies' success at matching project prioritization with local CWPP direction.

Many who have been involved in CWPP development are quick to note that in many cases the process is itself a success. Collaboration among local landowners, local governments, land management agencies and the State for fire planning also creates lasting relationships that extend beyond the immediate task. These networks are invaluable for information sharing and community capacity building. Throughout the West, there is enthusiasm for improving collaborative efforts, protecting communities, and developing strong fire management planning processes.