COMMUNITY-BASED FORESTRY AND THE NATIONAL FIRE PLAN
BRIEFING PAPER

Forest-dependent communities have an enormous stake in the National Fire Plan. The program affects community safety and economies, forest health and sustainability, and community vitality and stability. Moreover, the engagement of communities is essential to the success of the National Fire Plan -- since communities are made up of the people whose lives and livelihoods are threatened by catastrophic fire, whose businesses are essential to carry out key emergency fire suppression, fuel reduction, and wood product utilization programs.

MUTUAL GOALS

The primary goals of the National Fire Plan, the 10-Year Implementation Strategy of the Western Governor's Association, and the Healthy Forest Initiative are directly aligned with the interests of forest-dependent communities. These overlapping goals are:

Fire Suppression – Communities want to feel safe and are willing to contribute to make their communities safer through taxes, cost-share programs, and the suppression workforce.

Hazardous Fuel Reduction - Communities want healthy forests that can sustain natural fire without the risk of conflagration and they want their local workforce to carry out the restoration work.

Planning and Monitoring – Communities want to play a role in setting priorities for hazardous fuel reduction, fire management planning, and monitoring the progress and effects of the implementation of strategic plans.

Utilization/Local Economy – Communities want to see the job and business opportunities from fire suppression and fuel reduction to accrue to their residents and children, and they want small diameter wood to be utilized with innovative products.

The reasons that forest-dependent communities want the National Fire Plan to succeed are clear – they have everything to gain and everything to lose.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NATIONAL FIRE PLAN

After two years of National Fire Plan implementation, there are many success stories and a number of barriers that must be overcome to fully meet the stated goals. In this issue paper, we summarize some of the opportunities for communities and the agencies to work together to improve National Fire Plan implementation.

Fire Suppression

The federal land management agencies have nearly perfected their fire suppression tactics with close to a century of effort, although the increasing severity of wildfires in the last decade has presented them with new challenges. The work of fire suppression is now done with agency personnel, a seasonal workforce of fire specialists, national contractors who supply on-call suppression crews, and national private sector contractors who support the fire suppression campaigns. Local workforces sometimes contribute to fire suppression efforts by supplying heavy equipment, water trucks, timber falling services, and meals, but local private sector fire crews are extremely rare. For example, 94% of all the 20-person crews nationwide are currently dispatched out of Oregon, and there are about five big contractors who operate these crews.

The dominance of national contractors in fire suppression means that contractors from rural communities have few opportunities to supply workers to suppress fire when it occurs close to home. The ease of managing national contracts does not outweigh the inefficiency of by-passing local suppression crews and transporting national contract crews. In addition, many rural communities are finding that agency fire suppression jobs have been eliminated and replaced with contract fire crews from urban areas.

Hazardous Fuels Reduction

Hazardous fuel reduction activities include fuel break construction, forest thinning, and prescribed burning. This work is sometimes available to contractors who are based in communities near the fuel reduction site and who employ local workers crews. However, the agencies rarely have enough work to keep a local crew busy throughout the season. In the Southwest, contracts under $25,000 are reserved for local operators while larger contracts are awarded to national contractors who offer a better price. In the Pacific Northwest, many of the contractors who are selected to perform thinning and fuels reduction are the same contractors who operate the on-call suppression crews. The contractors employ the same workers for both activities, and are able to take a loss on fuel reduction contracts because of the profits they make on fire suppression. The mechanized thinning is often done on large IDIQ (indefinite delivery, indefinite quantity) contracts that are geographically dispersed. The contracts are often packaged to include job sites across several states, which is beyond the reasonable working circle of most communities. In one example, the Oregon BLM contracted mechanical fuels reduction through 5 large IDIQ contracts and the BLM and National Forests in Oregon and California placed task orders against the contract.

Fire suppression and hazardous fuels reduction could be made more efficient and cost effective by explicitly linking the fire suppression and hazardous fuel reduction workforce at the local level. Since local crews are not working in the woods to reduce hazardous fuels, and are not organized to respond to fire emergencies, the agencies must rely on national crews, with significant transportation and support expenses that raises the total cost of fire suppression.

Planning and Monitoring

Planning for successful restoration of fire-adapted ecosystems and monitoring the social and economic effects of the National Fire Plan must be accomplished at the site level. National scale planning is a start, but tools to assist priority setting (e.g. fire regime condition class) are currently at too coarse for project level planning. Likewise, national reports of acres of fuels reduction treated provide accountability but do not track whether the activities are having the desired effects on forest, economic, and community health. The long term success of the NFP is dependent upon sustaining a local infrastructure for planning and monitoring, and it cannot reside solely within the agency because the outside partners create the political will to keep the program alive.

However, there is currently no workforce for planning and monitoring because there is no funding for the activity outside of a few small grants programs. Communities are logical partners for monitoring and evaluating the outcomes and impacts of the fire plan because they share the agencies' interest in measuring change. Communities are also interested, like Congress, in accountability for National Fire Plan funds and accomplishments.

Many forest-dependent communities are interested in mitigating the disproportionate effect of wildfire on poor residents who stand to lose all of their financial assets in one fire. Less than 5% of the funds for the National Fire Plan have gone to support fire-proofing and other fire prevention activities, for any communities, and even less has gone to underwrite the costs of fire-proofing the homes and communities of poor people. The poverty and wildfire connection needs to be considered in both planning and monitoring programs.

As the agencies place more emphasis on pre-decisional processes, pending changes to the regulations for administrative appeals, the need for the strong collaborative skills that many communities possess, will increase both inside and outside agencies. Communities with collaborative experience can provide technical assistance to the agencies, as well as other communities, to accelerate collaborative capacity.

Utilization

The cost of hazardous fuel reduction to taxpayers is greatly reduced in areas where local markets have been developed with multiple uses for the by-products of thinning. Utilization of the small diameter wood decreases the cost of the thinning and increases the social and political will to keep the National Fire Plan alive. The opportunities for rural economic development are curtailed when access to the wood by-products of fuels reduction is limited to regional processors. If the range of value-added products is narrow, the potential to increase the value through various markets will also be limited.

When local businesses are provided access to the small diameter by-products three benefits accrue. First, the local businesses increase the market value of the wood from restoration. Second, the cost of fuels reduction treatments to taxpayers will decline. Finally, local businesses support local crews that work in the woods, which provides a local workforce for fire suppression and reduces travel costs and fire emergency response time.

MECHANISMS TO ACHIEVE COMMUNITY AND FIRE PLAN GOALS

Capacity-building

Many communities already have the capacity to be effective partners in carrying out the National Fire Plan as previously described. A large number of forest-dependent communities need some investment in capacity building in one or more key areas. For example, a community may have a trained firefighting workforce but few local contractors for fuel reduction work, or a community may have an organized workforce, but few markets for the wood by-products. Other barriers to community success, such as insurance premiums based on rates for logging, not restoration, may be broken down with focused effort and technical assistance. A small amount of capacity building can go a long way, and the existing grants and technical assistance programs, such as the Economic Action Program and the Forest Products Lab's small diameter utilization program, have proven to be effective at building community capacity.

The National Fire Plan's emphasis on community assistance presents an opportunity to build the capacity of underserved- and low-capacity communities. These communities consistently report that information on the National Fire Plan is difficult to find, and inconsistent, and as a result, many are still unaware of the fire plan and the opportunities associated with it. It is critical that traditionally underserved and lower capacity communities have access to information about activities, programs, and economic opportunities associated with the National Fire Plan, and wherever possible have the opportunity to participate meaningfully in planning and decision-making.

Contracting and Agreements

In 2001 and subsequent years, the Interior appropriation authorized new uses of contracts, grants and agreements for use with National Fire Plan funds. Wide use of these authorities will greatly improve the effectiveness of the National Fire Plan as well as creating benefits to rural communities, workers and contractors. The new contracting, grant, and agreement authorities are not being used consistently at the forest and district level, and the linkage of the authorities to annual appropriations is creating barriers to their use.

Funding

The Economic Action Program (EAP) funding is vital to the success of the National Fire Plan. EAP is being used to create community fire plans, which are leading directly to improved fire suppression coordination and direct hazard reduction dollars to the areas that need it most. Moreover, these funds are being used to increase the utilization of the by-products of hazard reduction, which should, over time, reduce the costs of hazard reduction.

The "borrowing" of NFP funds during the 2002 fire season had immediate negative effects on the implementation of the National Fire Plan. It greatly reduced hazard reduction efforts on public and private lands. The delay and cancellation of planned grants created considerable financial hardship for many of the agencies' key community partners, making it more difficult to reach the program objectives. The question of reimbursement added uncertainty on top of problems created by delays in project implementation. Agency-community partnerships depend on institutional commitments to consistent, multi-year programs.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Suppression

- Use local fuel reduction crews to provide the workforce for wildfire suppression.

Fuel Reduction

- Facilitate contracts for businesses that employ local workers to perform fuel reduction and structure the contracts to keep the crews busy throughout the season.
- Award contracts that pay the true cost of fuel reduction and removal of slash and small diameter wood.
- Provide clear direction to field offices that the National Fire Plan contracting and grant and agreement authorities should be used, and stress the need for commitment to building the permanent infrastructure for all elements of this plan.
- Structure stewardship contracting so that it can be a vehicle to build this infrastructure.

Planning and Monitoring

- Use local fuel reduction/suppression crews to provide the workforce for planning and monitoring and community groups to provide the infrastructure for monitoring and reporting. Involve National Association of Counties in the monitoring of this program.
- Develop special initiatives to reduce fire risk in communities whose poverty makes them especially vulnerable to wildfire loss, using the existing State and Private Forestry delivery vehicles of State Foresters and the Rural Community Assistance program of EAP.
- Work with local governments and representatives from community-based groups to interface more effectively with the agencies. Options include participation in 10-year Strategy Implementation Teams and state or regional advisory groups for the Wildfire Interagency Leadership Council.
- Improve outreach to communities to keep them informed about the National Fire Plan and enlist community-based forestry organizations to assist with outreach as well as monitoring and reporting.

Utilization

- Provide local businesses with access to the wood by-products of fuel reduction.

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