

WILDFIRE, POVERTY AND THE NATIONAL FIRE PLAN

BRIEFING PAPER

BACKGROUND

All communities, whether wealthy or poor, suffer direct economic consequences when wildfire destroys homes. However, wildfire has a disproportionately greater effect on the low-income households that occur in wildland urban interfaces across the western United States. Nearly one-third of the 10-15 million households in the wildland urban interface are low income – and their residents are more likely to lose all of their assets – buildings, possessions, livestock, and vehicles – when fire strikes. By contrast, middle- and high-income families usually have homeowners or renters insurance to replace their lost possessions and have financial assets in the form of bank accounts and investments that fire does not affect. Furthermore, poor communities usually have low-quality fire protection services and the residents generally lack the resources to fireproof their homes.

The National Fire Plan has as one of its five stated goals “to improve fire protection for rural communities.” If the National Fire Plan is to achieve this goal for rich and poor communities alike, the effect of wildfire on low-income people must be addressed. Several studies have found that the fire risk reduction and post-fire assistance programs do not systematically address the needs of poor communities. The studies, conducted by the Center for Watershed and Community Health (University of Oregon) and the Southwest Community Forestry Research Center, had similar findings about the need for programs to mitigate the effects of wildfire on poor communities.

National Fire Plan programs have not explicitly recognized that poor, rural communities have less ability to reduce fire risks on their own or that low-income households suffer greater consequences when fire occurs. Less than 5% of the funds for the National Fire Plan went to support fire-proofing and other fire prevention activities (for any communities), and even less was used to underwrite the costs of fire-proofing the homes and communities of poor people. Agency research makes clear that fire-proofing individual structures is the most effective fire prevention strategy, and these measures would be especially cost-effective if directed toward poor households and communities. Despite the best of intentions, the rural poor often fall through the cracks of fire prevention programs and services. Public land management agencies and social service organizations need to be informed about the relationships between wildfires and rural poverty.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Conduct state or regional planning to identify poverty areas with high fire risk.

State and regional planning can help profile areas for both wildfire risk and poverty. This data can be used in directing funding to targeted areas.

- Map fire risk within the targeted areas using available data (Forestry, BLM, or other agencies).
- Determine criteria for identifying poverty areas (e.g., median income, unemployment rate, percentage of community below the poverty level) and include on map with relative fire risk.
- Identify the redundancy, gaps, and weak areas in fire prevention services available to poor communities and develop an interagency strategy to fill the gaps. Test the strategy through pilot projects that build the capacity of poor communities to take fire protection measures.

2. Create new mechanisms to direct some National Fire Plan funding explicitly to poor communities that are severely threatened by wildfire by adapting and revising existing grants programs that discriminate against poor residents. Some of the existing grant programs may be biased against poor communities because of the perception that funding for an urban project or upscale development may have a higher benefit/cost ratio, without recognition of the lower resilience to fire in impoverished communities. Furthermore, poor communities are often overlooked in outreach efforts, and may have more difficulty competing for the grants when they have less of the expertise needed to develop successful applications.

- A. Develop criteria for prioritizing individual landowner and community grant applicants from poor residents.
For example, criteria for grants administered through State and Private Forestry and state agency partners could include (1) distance to an effective fire station; (2) the ability of individual landowners to afford fire insurance and to create defensible space; and, (3) the ability of a community to recover should they suffer a catastrophic fire, measured by median wage and percent of residents below the poverty level.
- B. Develop a set-a-side amount of funding from the National Fire Plan for distribution to poor communities based on the criteria listed above.
A set-a-side could provide communities of a certain type (e.g., small and impoverished) opportunity to compete for grant funds among their peer communities.
- C. Allow for in-kind matches in making grants to landowners in poor communities.
Grant programs that require cash matches discriminate against the individuals in poor communities who simply cannot afford a cash match. For example, in some rural New Mexico communities, the amount of cash match needed for a 5-acre project is equivalent to 10% of the average community member's annual income.
- D. Allow landowners to keep the cut wood.
The National Fire Plan grants program through the Soil and Water Conservation District in central New Mexico allows landowners to keep up to 8 cords of wood from publicly-funded thinning projects. This provision makes sense for bedroom communities of urban areas, but not for the forest-dependent communities. The contractors are allowed to keep the wood in excess of 8 cords, when the community could harvest and sell the wood themselves.

3. Support fire grant applications that request funding for fire prevention projects. Fire prevention activities will reduce the cost of future wildfires, benefiting poor communities that lack the resilience to recover from the costs of a fire disaster. Fire prevention activities may also stimulate economic growth in these communities through private sector partnerships, community forestry programs or other mitigation projects.

4. Build linkages with social service agencies and organizations to extend fire protection services available through the National Fire Plan to poor rural communities. A coordinated strategy should be developed between the faith community (who are often the main source of social services), public social service agencies, and land management agencies for preventing and responding to wildfires that impact the rural poor. An organized approach among these groups can result in coordinated prevention strategies and development and implementation of disaster response plans.

For further information:

Laura McCarthy
The Forest Trust
PO Box 519
Santa Fe, NM 87504
505.983.3111
laura@theforestrust.org

Kathy Lynn
Program for Watershed and Community Health
Institute for a Sustainable Environment
5247 University of Oregon
Eugene, OR 97403
541.346.0687
Kathy_lynn1@yahoo.com