

Rural
Voices
for
Conservation

*Working together to
find solutions to the
ecological and economic
challenges of the rural
West.*

- American Forests
- Center for Watershed & Community Health
- Communities Committee of the 7th American Forest Congress
- Ecosystem Workforce Program
- Flathead Economic Policy Center
- Forest Trust
- Framing Our Community
- Gifford Pinchot Task Force
- Hells Canyon Preservation Council
- Jefferson State Forest Products
- Jefferson Sustainable Development Initiative
- Lake County Resources Initiative
- Mattole Restoration Council
- Northwest Ecosystem Alliance
- Northwest Natural Resources Group
- Old-Growth Campaign
- Partnership for a Sustainable Methow
- Redwood Community Action Agency
- Sierra Forest Communities Institute
- Sustainable Northwest
- Wallowa Resources
- Watershed Research & Training Center
- Wildlands CFR

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.¹ 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. With annual costs of wildfire continuing to rise (federal agencies spent over 1.6 billion dollars in 2002 on suppression alone²), rural poor communities cannot be ignored during funding allocation through the National Fire Plan and other fire-related programs.

One of the National Fire Plan’s five stated goals is “to improve fire protection for rural communities.” If the National Fire Plan is to achieve this goal, for rich and poor communities alike, then the effects of wildfire on low-income people must be addressed.

Less than 5% of the funds for the National Fire Plan went to support fire protection activities (for any communities), and even less was used to underwrite the costs of protecting the homes and communities of poor people. Agency research makes clear that creating defensible space around 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.³ Public land management agencies and social service organizations need to be informed about the relationships between wildfires and rural poverty.

The recent passage of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act brings the potential for increased funding for community fuels reduction and guidelines for developing community fire plans. As rulemaking and implementation of HFRA begins, there is an opportunity to ensure that program language is inclusive of the needs of the rural poor and that programs provide sufficient resources and technical assistance to poor communities nationwide.

¹ Wildfire and Poverty Report, Center for Watershed and Community Health (2001)

² National Interagency Fire Center Wildland Fire Statistics - <http://www.nifc.gov/stats/wildlandfirestats.html#Costs>

³ SWFC, Working Paper #8, <http://www.theforestrust.org/reaseasrch?publications?>

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.

An example of this type of study is currently in progress. The National Network of Forest Practitioners, the University of Oregon's Program for Watershed and Community Health, and the USDA Forest Service, State and Private Forestry and Economic Action Programs are collaborating to map indicators of poverty and capacity, allocation of National Fire Plan funds and wildfire risk. This effort is intended to examine where gaps in fire protection services exist in poor communities.

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 that recognize poverty and special needs when prioritizing individual landowner and community grant applications.

Criteria for grants administered through State and Private Forestry and state agency partners could include (1) distance to an effective fire station (or communities with an ISO fire hazard rating of 8, 9 or 10); (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. Indicators of poverty can be used as part of these eligibility criteria, including reviewing the percentage of community members at or below 185% of the federal poverty level or Housing and Urban Development Income limits, among other indicators.

B. Develop a set-aside amount of funding from the National Fire Plan for distribution to poor communities based on the criteria listed above.

A set-aside could provide communities of a certain type (e.g., small and impoverished) opportunity to compete for grant funds among their peer communities.

C. Create incentives for low-income residents to participate in fuel reduction programs.

For example, make sure that grant programs do not require cash matches that individuals in poor communities cannot afford. Allow landowners to keep the wood from publicly funded thinning projects and serve as contractors 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 local community organizations, 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.

Who We Are

The Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition is comprised of western rural and local, regional, and national organizations that have joined together to promote balanced conservation-based approaches to the ecological and economic problems facing the West. We are committed to finding and promoting solutions through collaborative, place-based work that recognizes that the inextricable link between the long-term health of the land and well-being of rural communities. We come from California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, New Mexico, and Montana.

For More Information:

Kathy Lynn, Program for Watershed and Community Health
Institute for a Sustainable Environment, University of Oregon
541.346.0687; kathy@uoregon.edu

Laura McCarthy, The Forest Trust
505.983.8992 x 14; laura@theforesttrust.org