Wildfire Resilience Workshop Series

Summary of Workshop 5

On June 6-8, 2022, the Aspen Institute Energy & Environment Program and The Nature Conservancy convened the fifth in a series on U.S. wildfire resilience in Seeley Lake, Montana and virtually via Zoom. With over 100 years of fire suppression, climate change exacerbating ecological conditions, and ever more people living within the wildfire urban interface (WUI), wildfires have become increasingly frequent and severe. The Aspen-TNC series of wildfire resilience workshops is intended to incubate ideas and solutions to inform a policy roadmap around wildfire resilience and to spark a paradigm shift in addressing this issue. Specifically, this particular workshop was aimed at exploring how vulnerable communities can better prepare for, and respond to, wildfires, and considered strategies to ensure resources and capacity are appropriately directed to address existing challenges within these communities. This summary captures some of the key topics of discussion.

Incorporating Social Considerations into Wildfire Risk Reduction and Recovery

Currently, technical experts make wildfire risk assessments and calculations based on the likelihood of exposure, spatial extent and scale, and the effects on specific values, with the goal often to reduce complexity into simplified models. These types of models are then used to inform consequential financial decisions and allocations of federal resources for wildfire risk reduction work. Risk models are generally successful at accounting for variation in biological and ecological factors that affect wildfire behavior. In contrast, the critical importance of local social conditions is often not well-captured in such models, despite the acute relevance of social factors to wildfire response and resilience. When models do account for social considerations, they generally adopt a one-size-fits-all approach that fails to account for a diversity of conditions. Consequently, model outputs often lead managers to simply prioritize the protection of high-value homes via fire suppression, despite the diversity of potential needs that might be highlighted if decision-making included more consideration of social factors.

The narrow scope of wildfire risk models presents a social justice and equity issue when the power to select winners and losers in terms of resource allocations lies in the hands of a select few privileged experts. Addressing justice concerns in models will require a deeper, more nuanced consideration of relevant social factors that should inform community wildfire response and resilience. Models generally presume, for example, that structure loss is the most important concern for most communities, which fails to recognize the diversity of losses that may be a priority for a given community (e.g., damage to agriculture lands or native resources). Adaptive capacity is also not well considered in wildfire risk models, presenting additional justice concerns around resource allocations. Certain communities might

have significantly more or less capacity to access resources and make the investments necessary to build resilience to fires. Still other communities might have vast knowledge about wildfire resilience, but lack the power and resources to put that knowledge into practice. Relying too closely on technical models that fail to account for social considerations sends the message that this expertise is of limited value and does little to build lasting trust with communities. Some groups, such as, the Indigenous People's Burning Network and Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network, have worked to account for a diverse set of social and ecological experiences.

The importance of incorporating social science data into risk assessments was repeatedly raised, with several tools available to support integration of demographic data. These include the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Environmental Justice Screen and the Center for Environmental Quality's (CEQ) new climate and environmental justice screening tool, and the Center for Disease Control's (CDC) social vulnerability index (SVI). Communities may experience a range of individual vulnerabilities (e.g., variable impacts of smoke inhalation or capacity to evacuate on short notice) and unique barriers to accessing government programs related to wildfire resilience and responses. While it can be more challenging to gather data around these types of issues in rural areas, incorporating more of this local, place-based data into wildfire risk assessments (perhaps via larger national census data) is crucial to better serve these communities. The rural capacity map from Headwater Economics and other decision support tools were raised as useful tools to find some of these data.

Federal and state agencies are working to incorporate socioeconomic considerations into their planning and considering equity in their wildfire resilience strategies. As part of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, the U.S. Forest Service has invested in 10 landscapes across the West and, while equity was not part of the selection of those landscapes (they were primarily selected based on fireshed models), the agency is now looking to incorporate equity considerations and measures into planning on the landscapes. Some of these considerations include paying attention to equity over equality, meaning rather than aiming for equality or sameness to all, accounting for people starting from different places and acknowledging and adjusting imbalances accordingly.

Without considering the demographics of underserved communities, and without baseline data, the Forest Service and other entities providing wildfire resilience and preparedness services will remain ignorant to the individual needs of the communities they are serving. These entities can improve how they measure adaptive capacity, which will help agencies to address communities' vulnerabilities and magnify their strengths. The Forest Service's current emphasis on equity offers an opportunity to do just this, largely by fostering community-specific engagement and enabling the agency to be more nimble and adaptive. FEMA is also working to advance racial and socio-econoimc equity in planning processes, and to build capacity in rural and environmentally and economically disadvantaged communities. For instance, the agency is building capacity through interagency and cross sector cooperation, facilitating partner connections, and implementing direct technical assistance in collaboration with partnerships. FEMA is also working with communities to find data so they can share their own stories, with indicators specific to each state.

Identifying and Mitigating Community Capacity Gaps

Capacity building is crucial across agencies and sectors. Much of this work should involve facilitating partner connections (collaboratives or collaborative processes incorporating key stakeholders in communities who are already trusted) and enabling direct technical assistance as part of these partnerships. Level setting across programs/between agencies in terms of terminology, for example, was also raised as very important in order to properly advance social considerations.

Coordinators that span boundaries across organizations can serve as added capacity and be essential to addressing wildfire risk. Cross boundary coordinating positions can bridge cultural differences and align work by using information like local fireshed details and tribal management plans. There are significant opportunities at the local level to bring social science data into risk assessments, which are critical. One flag raised was that some communities do not want federal government assistance. A broad, diverse network of public, tribal, private entities, including local coordinators, can help build social acceptance and trust as locals remain on the ground while agency representatives come and go. Communities need to be involved in shaping the plans and included in decision making processes.

While funding for fire recovery in Northwest Montana has improved over the last 20 years, tribal communities remain challenged by limited workforces, especially in an era of megafires. Unemployment rates on reservations can be 60-70% higher than other communities and many lack the skillsets to develop the necessary expertise to either secure work or understand the funding process. As funding from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act rolls out, there is significant need to increase workforce capacity on all tribal reservations. The Salish Community College has upgraded to two-year and four-year degrees in forestry and natural resource management—an option that should be promoted to create a pipeline of younger people to help protect reservation homelands with skills like GIS and data science, and assist in getting traction with larger agencies. An intern process through the Intertribal Timber Council and/or Forest Service has been explored, which could entice individuals with natural resource management positions and draw in younger students with the benefits of longer term professional positions (rather than short stints before returning to reservations out of college).

The influx of funding through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) has increased expectations that a significant amount of work will soon be implemented on the ground. Yet this increase will require an expanded contractor base (including, for example, wildfire biologists, GIS specialists, engineers, contract specialists, and human resources) to manage the work and workforce, especially in areas that are not currently organized or equipped to receive resources, lack wildfire coordinators, or do not have local mills. Building out wildfire workforce capacity will be a critical first step to ensure IIJA funds can be rapidly and equitably deployed.

“Rigaramarole Reduction Act” (a.k.a streamlining processes)

There was overwhelming agreement that federal grant applications are outdated, clunky, burden applicants with complex requirements, and that the process is often inaccessible from the outset. Requiring applicants to cover upfront costs poses an immediate barrier to grant applications, and waivers

should be considered. Counties in particular need more staff capacity to manage the processes. It was suggested that Land Trusts and other organizations might be able to provide capacity for grant writing.

Furthermore, even when applicants are able to overcome the hurdles and submit grant applications, the timelines and processes for decision-making can be opaque, leading to unexpected outcomes (such as, less funding than anticipated). Unclear processes can be detrimental to communities when they have immediate need for funds and/or the timeline for those funds is then too limited to find a contractor (especially challenging when fuel money is tied to fiscal years). Specifically, procurement contracts often require that treatments be completed within two-year windows while projects must have at least three years of funding. Expanded grace periods within the timeframe of grants, making grants multi-year rather than tied to fiscal years, and generally simplified processes would help to ameliorate this issue. On top of this timing barrier, reporting requirements further challenge already strained, limited community resources.

Because federal application and approval processes tend to be slow and complicated, many communities that would benefit from grants are prevented from even applying, and others may not even know the grants exist. The group discussed a few different potential solutions to minimize this problem, many of which are related and could be implemented together. To begin, one participant noted the Forest Service could make the application process easier to navigate while also speeding up the Forest Service review process by eliminating unnecessary forms. This same participant suggested that once applicants are awarded grants, they could then work with regional Forest Service representatives to complete any additional forms. The group also discussed the potential benefits of building a centralized wildfire grant warehouse and application portal, which could help applicants easily navigate government grant applications and also provide online expert support. These two recommendations can be implemented together to streamline the current system and make navigating government grant applications simpler for communities with reduced adaptive capacity.

One additional solution, which has also been recommended at various other Aspen Institute Energy and Environment Program convenings, is the creation of a Federal Customer Service Center, or clearinghouse type entity, which applicants could call to receive assistance with grant applications. However, it was also noted that centers like this one have been created before and since been discontinued, and there is currently no funding available for this type of federal service. Another suggestion was to use USDA State and Private Forestry Forest Action Plan funds to invest in regional coordinator positions that can help communities navigate the complex federal funding landscape.

In addition to the burden of covering upfront costs, the requirement for grantees to provide non-federal match [1]was also identified as a significant barrier, especially for underserved and low-income communities. One of the goals behind pursuing direct technical assistance through nonprofits and community-based organization partnerships is to find creative ways to further reduce the cost share burden through public-private partnerships.

Cross boundary planning can be particularly challenging because each jurisdiction has different systems in place for planning and implementing work, and moving money across organizations is complex. Increasing cross boundary coordination should create greater nimbleness across the board.

Additional Opportunities

Currently FEMA's Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) grants only allow landowners to reduce wildfire risk through vegetation removal, yet should be expanded to allow for home-hardening on both new and existing homes. The home-hardening burden, such as installing a metal roof, falls to homeowners, yet there are few incentives and resources to do so on their own.

There is also an opportunity to include contractor perspectives in conversations to share their views on how this work is actually carried out on the ground and what kind of timeline they would like to see from the agencies. The perspective of lenders and insurance companies related to development in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) could also prove highly valuable. This is especially important as it was pointed out that there is an enormous inequity between the conversations at these workshops and the actual on the ground firefighting and the two should be brought into better parity.

Influence from State and Local Government

States can have significant sway on federal decision makers. For example, it was suggested the West as a regions could develop a set of western-specific FEMA-related recommendations on federal funding fixes and with specificity include recommendations for the BRIC program that includes streamlining grant processes, eliminating upfront costs for projects, and increasing technical expertise on the ground so that local jurisdictions have the capacity to apply for grants. State legislators might also push for a regional coordination council to harness the power of county commissioners and encourage cross boundary collaboration. For example,a state could create enabling conditions for local governments to refer to WUI maps when planning and allowing counties to make the WUI codes more stringent. A number of ideas were raised rethinking planning around the WUI, including connecting wildfire risk with

[1] Close to two months after this workshop, on July 22, U.S. Forest Service Chief Moore issued an interim policy direction on Match and Substantial Cash Contribution Policy Changes. Specifically, for all partnership agreements, the agency is broadening its definition of the values that partners bring to the partnership as part of their match contributions; the requirement for "substantial cash contribution" is eliminated effective as of July 22; two national match waivers were announced (for tribes and agreements that served underserved communities); and a process for reduction of policy match requirements was established. This has addressed the concerns of match requirements as barriers to project implementation, especially with IIJA funding.

affordable housing, implementing a WUI impact fee that goes in part to affordable housing, expanding peoples concept of where fire can occur, including grasslands.

States could explore solutions to address liability challenge implementation of controlled burns. States could also advocate for the loosening of restrictions and accessibility of funding for home hardening beyond vegetation, the development of a matching account for mitigation and restoration from infrastructure funding, and create a local match-fund for communities that have fire adapted community fund. For example, Montana currently has a suppression account that could be amended to include prevention and post-fire restoration, and could potentially be funded by a second homeowner tax which would help to address inequities related to wildfire prevention.

Resources:

- https://headwaterseconomics.org/natural-hazards/wildfire-risk-to-communities/
- https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2022/06/06/2022-12071/request-for-information-rfi-regarding-wildfire-crisis-implementation-plan
- https://www.dnr.wa.gov/publications/rp_wildfire_strategic_plan.pdf