



Wildfire Resilience Workshop Series

Summary

Workshop 3: Leveraging Partnerships for Success

On March 15-16, 2022, the Aspen Institute Energy & Environment Program, The Nature Conservancy, and Council of Western State Foresters convened a virtual workshop — the third in a series on U.S. wildfire resilience. Following the passage of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA, [P.L. 117-58](#)) and its unprecedented levels of funding for wildfire resilience work, this convening brought together state, tribal, federal, NGO, and other experts to deepen their shared understanding of the funding available so that they can prepare to access this funding and implement wildfire resilience activities. This summary captures some of the key topics of discussion.

Overview of Funding Surge

A paradigm shift is needed in how the United States deals with wildfire resilience, from a singular focus on suppression to a greater emphasis on landscape and community resilience. This shift is underway and evident in the 10-year strategy from the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) on wildfire resilience announced this year, as well as in the funding allocations in the IIJA.

Funding in the IIJA spans five fiscal years (FY), from FY2022 through FY2026. Given the enormity in the cost of this challenge, this funding represents a down-payment on this much needed work. Within the \$1.2 trillion IIJA, wildfire-related funding includes the following:

- \$2.85 billion over five fiscal years for the USFS National Forest System, including \$2.12 billion for wildfire risk reduction (40803) and ecosystem restoration (40804), \$514 million for hazardous fuels management, and \$225 million for burned area recovery.
- \$1.53 billion over five fiscal years for state and private forestry, including \$718 million for wildfire risk reduction and ecosystem restoration (40803 and 40804), \$500 million for grants to at-risk communities, \$88 million for state fire assistance, and \$20 million for volunteer fire assistance.
- \$1.46 billion over five fiscal years for the Department of Interior (DOI) wildland fire management, including \$1.055 billion for wildfire risk reduction (40803), \$35.6 million per year for fuels management, and \$45 million per year for burned area rehabilitation.

- \$3.37 billion total over five fiscal years for 40803, between funds from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and DOI, including funding for salaries, community wildfire defense grants, mapping, collaboration, prescribed fire, post-fire restoration, detection and monitoring, and firewood banks.
- \$2.13 billion total over five fiscal years for 40804, between funds from USDA and DOI, including for contracts, state and tribal implementation of Good Neighbor Agreements on federal lands, financial assistance to byproduct processing facilities, implementation of voluntary ecosystem restoration projects, invasive species work, and national revegetation efforts.
- \$500 million to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) for watershed and flood prevention, \$118 million for watershed rehabilitation, and \$300 million for emergency watershed protection.
- \$1 billion for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC). (IIJA provides \$6.8 billion for FEMA to invest in community-wide mitigation, including \$5 billion for hazard mitigation assistance.)

IIJA also quadruples investments for reforestation projects on national forests by removing the current \$30 million funding cap on the Reforestation Trust Fund, and it focuses on reforestation following wildfires and unplanned events. IIJA codifies the Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership Program as well, with \$90 million each for FY2022 and FY2023, split between NRCS and USFS.

In addition, the appropriations bill doubles annual funding for the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration program for FY2022 and allows for double the amount of projects per region and overall per year.

There is a significant amount of new funding available for this work, but its allocations are complex. With this overview in mind, the meeting focused on how partners can integrate, access, and navigate these surges in investment.

Status of Federal Agency Plans

Agency staff from USFS, DOI Office of Wildland Fire, and FEMA provided an update on current spending plans and priorities, sharing concerns about how much funding is available now and how those concerns will only heighten if even more funding becomes available (e.g., if Build Back Better passes). There was a sense, that it is almost “too big of a bite to take”. It takes time to do the necessary planning, coordination, partner evaluation and engagement -- raising concerns that the push to put money on the ground quickly could lead to investments that are not fully considered.

The USFS is looking at operationalizing the surge of IIJA funding in a phased approach. Phase 1 (years 1-2) will involve working with regions and partners to identify some early wins — projects that could be implemented very quickly because they have been in the works for several years,

have had some collaborative involvement, and have undergone environmental analysis. Just after this meeting in April 2022, the agency announced those [initial landscape investments](#), focusing on broad landscape scale, cross-boundary work in 10 initial high-risk fire sheds that can immediately reduce risks to communities, watersheds, and infrastructure. The work will be done in close concert with local partners on the ground and at the national level.

The USFS is also identifying ongoing challenges faced by the agency and building out its implementation plan for Phase 2 (years 3-10). Over the past five years, most of the agency's grants and agreements for fuels and fire risk work have been with states, other federal agencies, and non-profits. The agency will be looking to diversify the pool of partners by creating more opportunities for tribes, minority-based institutions, and others. Most agreements in the past have been to support on-the-ground projects and to enhance capacity building. Moving forward, the USFS may also look to invest more in training, monitoring, and planning work, including increased training on how to use Good Neighbor and Stewardship agreements, and creating efficiencies through master agreements. To address significant barriers around equity and inclusion, specifically with respect to the internal grants and agreements process, there may be a need for positions that serve as process navigators within the agency.

DOI's Office of Wildland Fire likewise received significant increases in funding for its work on fuels management (about a 100% increase) and post-fire rehabilitation (about a 300% increase). Because the funding is slotted into existing program areas, this agency does not anticipate major changes in its funding approaches. That being said, the funding does present new opportunities for DOI to reconsider how it targets benefits to disadvantaged communities, particularly rural and tribal communities. In addition, the funding presents new opportunities for DOI to better integrate and align improvements in overall outcomes for ecosystem restoration, including for climate adaptation. DOI faces clear challenges as it manages diverse lands with diverse needs, and as it efficiently and effectively integrates those needs across boundaries, missions, and program areas. Like with USFS, DOI will have to work closely with partners to support implementation across boundaries on mutual priorities.

FEMA has a range of mitigation programs for states, localities, tribes, and others to respond to wildland fires and other disasters. Historically, FEMA mitigation funds have not traditionally gone to wildfire-related work, as much as it has for declared disasters like floods, tornadoes, and hurricanes, for example. There are several mitigation funding opportunities that could support wildfire related mitigation activities:

- Public Assistance (PA) 406 mitigation funding supplements the recovery process by allowing communities to upgrade and harden while repairing.
- The Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) is intended for long-term mitigation projects and is where the bulk of FEMA funding for mitigation work comes from. The HMGP provides funding after a declared disaster (during the immediate recovery period) to state, local, tribal, and territorial governments to rebuild in a way that reduces future losses (more than \$7 billion is currently available).

- FEMA also has a HMGP Post-Fire fund to provide supplemental funding for states, tribes, and territories to pursue mitigation projects after wildfire disasters that result in a Fire Management Assistance Grant (FMAG) declaration (eligible projects include post-fire erosion, seeding, flood diversion, defensible space, ignition-resistant construction, and fuels reduction).
- BRIC replaces the Pre-Disaster Mitigation funding and includes both state and tribal set-asides, as well as a nationwide competitive process. BRIC also supports greater investments in planning and projects before a disaster. It does require a state, territory, or tribe to have had a major disaster declaration within the last few years, but due to the COVID-19 declaration, everyone has satisfied that requirement for the next few years. Post-fire mitigation projects are also eligible for BRIC support, as are wildfire mitigation projects and non-construction activities (e.g., building code improvements).

Accessing Funding

With the surge in federal wildfire-related funding, partners are optimistic and ready to get to work, but there is funding from different laws (e.g., IJA, appropriations) flowing into different agencies and different programs within agencies. The different categories of funding make it a complex funding landscape to manage, and many factors come into play in terms of how to access, match, and apply different funding streams. There is a short-term need to simplify the complex web of potential funding streams and help partners, including federal partners, understand and access it. The surge in funding creates an opportunity for establishing ombudsman-type and/or process navigator positions (possibly housed in NGOs or at agencies) to help communities and tribes identify and navigate new funding sources.

In addition to enhancing understanding, streamlining could be another approach to improve access to funding. The confluence of different funding streams currently occurs at the community level, in a competitive environment, which can hinder holistic efforts. Partners that work with communities spend a lot of time trying to access funding for the suite of issues they are working on (e.g., building workforce, building capacity, investing in projects). This involves many different funding sources, and holistic strategies can break down if some of the grant proposals are not accepted. While it would be a challenging undertaking for agencies with different missions and targets, finding ways to pilot efforts to bring the confluence upstream for communities would be beneficial. For example, instead of organizations having to apply for multiple grants several times a year to fund the same basic work, one possibility could be to create a pooled approach. Similar to the way resumes are shared across USAJOBS, an organization could submit a single proposal related to wildfire risk reduction into a pool that several agencies — or to start, perhaps just DOI and USDA — could access. For tribes — which already receive funding from the federal government through the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in ways that are relatively simple and understood — streamlining could involve the USFS and BIA figuring out how to transfer funds from the former to the latter and to monitor, track, and oversee projects. For instance, tribes that are used to managing hundreds of project agreements under the Tribal Forest Protection Act might prefer that mechanism for getting

funding for implementation. The federal Wildfire Resilience Interagency Working Group is meant to be a space for an all-of-government approach to wildfire resilience and, along with the Wildland Fire Leadership Council, could be a space for a conversation about streamlining funding opportunities to make them better aligned and more accessible.

Intermediaries, such as non-profits, could also play a support role in helping with coordination and access. In California, for instance, there is a pilot project underway in which the California Office of Emergency Services is serving as the intermediary to access FEMA funds and direct them to home hardening efforts in a few communities that would otherwise have been unable to access that money. Similarly, mirroring the interest that partners have in aggregating funding at the national level, agencies may be interested in aggregating the partnership response. This could involve pushing funding out quickly via larger partners, who could in turn issue sub-grants to ensure that smaller organizations can access funding. Having larger entities serve as distributors of federal funds may be easier for smaller, less-resourced groups not only in terms of access, but also in terms of the reporting and compliance burdens on the back end. These approaches are not novel ideas. When the Northwest Forest Plan was established (which likewise resulted in a significant amount of money flowing into states in the region), state departments of commerce took on match responsibilities and provided capacity building grant opportunities for communities. There are some state agencies with missions to put money into communities and build capacity, and those entities have experience in putting together consortiums of NGOs in each state to issue subgrants. This process shows that leaning on existing resources and entities wherever possible does create efficiencies.

Another key barrier to accessing funding is a lack of capacity within organizations. Some organizations are well-positioned to apply for and receive federal funding, but others are not, especially for competitive grants. While the IJIA includes significant mention of underserved communities and under-represented populations, there are concerns that agency methods for distributing money have an implicit bias favoring those communities that can write well and put a narrative together that convinces the scoring panel to give them the most points. Highly resourced municipalities have the capacity to jump on grant opportunities, but many communities around them do not have capacity to put such narratives together, much less to compete for the funding. The competitive process inherently pits underserved communities against high-capacity communities, and highly-resourced landscapes often end up getting more funding than less-resourced ones, perpetuating this problematic cycle. If allocation methodologies do not change, under-represented communities in high-risk landscapes will continue to suffer.

Conversations are just starting in the agencies about improving equitable approaches to accessing funds. One approach could be to take some objective metric from census data to identify underserved communities and then to use that metric to split the applicant pool into two pools, such that high-capacity communities compete against other high-capacity communities and under-served communities compete against other under-served communities. That preserves the element of competition, as often required for federal grants, but creates a

more level playing field among those competing for dollars. This is a practical approach that could be implemented quickly. In addition, since the federal match component can be a liability for partners seeking federal dollars, waiving match requirements and changing other terms around access might also be necessary for communities and tribes with limited capacities. Even relatively low match requirements can create significant barriers to access. There are also opportunities for agencies to get funding to communities on the ground in non-competitive ways, such as through Stewardship and Good Neighbor agreements.

Efforts to make grant access easier and more equitable need to be cognizant of what can be changed and what cannot. For example, fiduciary capability is a key factor that influences who can receive federal grants. In many cases, the federal government has created additional requirements and procedures in order to reduce the government's risk. Yet these requirements can create excessive burdens and strategies are needed to create greater flexibility and change models and processes while heeding the precautionary safeguards underlying those requirements.

Mapping Needs

A key way to start addressing capacity and equity concerns is to map opportunities and needs. Once there is a map, partners can collectively determine how to fulfill capacity needs, where non-competitive funding options may need to be utilized, among other decision-making approaches.

In combination with regulatory alignment, workforce development, and economic development, mapping of the needs and scope of work can help align funding and instruments. It can also open conversations with industry about the potential increases in work that may be coming and help industry raise the capital investment needed to rise to the scale of the challenge.

Mapping needs may not need to consider boundaries or sources of funds. In this moment of funding abundance there is an opportunity to take a holistic approach about outcomes and to start with what is possible. And after then, move to how to get the money for implementation. Firesheds are not contained within boundaries or programs, and priority landscapes should be identified based on where the work is and where the needs are, not based on jurisdiction.

The right work in the right place is subjective, though. The effectiveness of mapping exercises as a tool for consensus-building is tied to the perception of how much work went into the mapping and whether it was an up-front collaborative process. People and partners must feel included in the process for these tools to be useful. In addition, some tribes are hesitant to participate or share their knowledge because they are trying to protect sacred lands and do not want them mapped out; on the other hand, there is a big opportunity for tribes to partner with state and federal agencies (and others) to work on off-reservation landscapes.

An additional challenge with maps is that they are out of date as soon as they are printed, as data and conditions are constantly changing. Real-time monitoring and remote sensing is needed to feed into prioritization efforts, making fire strategies less static and more interactive and adaptive.

Short-Term Priorities Versus Long-Term Change

The funding surge can soften some of the hard edges of managing for wildfire resilience while scaling capacity, such as getting crews in the field and having enough personal protective equipment. It can also enable local governments to expand the scope of their planned work from discrete treatments to entire watersheds, providing a huge economic push to local industries to scale-up.

The increased funding offers not only an opportunity to work at a larger scale (e.g., treat more acres), but also a rare opportunity to drive big change — to do things differently and better in terms of equity, partnerships, and focus. For example, the funding could offer an excellent opportunity to develop climate adaptation strategies for communities, states, forests, and public lands, including thoughtful work around what is needed to secure water supplies for the long term. It is likewise imperative to talk to communities about ecosystem resistance, resilience, and transition and to help think through strategies to adapt to the climate-related changes coming their way (e.g., ponderosa pines losing their dominance, landscapes transitioning to other vegetation). The reality that there will be changes in vegetation cover across landscapes (e.g. through post-disturbance) has to be considered in discussions about outcomes and planning, especially as many policies, regulations, and laws were developed at a time when natural systems and ecology were seen as more stagnant. Identifying these outdated policies and systems will be important to develop resilient landscapes in the face of climate change.

There is a tension, however, between the desire for transformational change and the urgency of expectations — between partners' and agencies' desires to operate differently and the expectations of the purse-holders (e.g., Congress, Office of Management and Budget). In the short-term, it will be crucial to accomplish land management objectives through existing partners and arrangements, in order to hold onto the political coalition to support IJA funding. Working in shovel-ready landscapes— where NEPA analysis is completed and there is public support for work at scale — can help demonstrate early success. Investing in these high-capacity communities and groups early on will be critical to helping show what is possible on the ground, and potentially increasing success in future years.

Meanwhile many of the significant changes in culture and process that are necessary and enumerated above, could potentially hinder the response needed in the short term. These broader changes should be reserved for the medium to long term, when the agencies can think through pilot projects or landscapes where newer models or ideas can be tried, whether on more coordinated funding, performance measures for staff, or capacity building. Relationships and partnerships will be essential to make this work successful in the long-term. The agency

should begin considering strategies for cultivating new leaders and creating new leadership structures in order to help set land managers, and their partners, up for success.

Agency Relationships with Partners

Federal agencies have different cultures, approaches, and processes that can make implementation bumpy for partners on the ground. Even just among the USDA agencies, navigating different agency staff, culture, technical requirements, priorities, and approaches can make projects challenging.

Partnering with agencies requires certain conditions. Partners should be approached as part of a joint process, rather than as participants in a top-down approach. With big influxes of funding, different sets of people can influence priority-setting and up-end priorities that had previously been set or projects already in process. Agencies need to — and are starting to — shift their cultures, from showing up *to* partners to showing up *as* partners. Still, some staff go to public-facing partner meetings and actively try to problem-solve, while others wait to be approached. The commitment to participate in collaborative programs should be embedded into agency cultures. In addition, existing, new and detailed staff should understand the universe of partners and critical conversations in which they engage. Metrics and incentives for people-oriented “soft skills” could help but are difficult to devise. It is much easier to measure number of acres than the number of productive partner conversations held. At a minimum, agencies need more people in grants and agreements, partnership offices, and planning teams.

A past example of a positive partnership program was the Forest Service’s Rural Communities Assistance Program, which provides grants to rural communities to facilitate new natural resource economic development opportunities. However, the program that incentivized USFS staff to systematically engage with communities no longer exists. The legislative language for the program still exists, but has not been funded in over a decade, representing a diminishment of the USFS’s ability to be in meaningful relationship with many communities and tribes. If the agency brought back that program (or at least its mentality) and trained people to be in positions of community engagement and assistance, it could result in significant improvements in community capacity building and agency relationship building.

Additionally, agencies should continue to reach out to NGO partners for support and to prioritize collaborative approaches. The funding surge from IJA is spurring such conversations. There are some existing regional maps of collaboratives working across the West, which could offer agency staff opportunities to see who is working in within their regions or landscapes and where collaboration may be possible. Collaboratives with elaborate governance systems may not be the right model for every area, but there are multiple ways to work together, build community, and make connections on the local level. Another approach is for the USFS work jointly with partners on one big action plan to build capacity (or develop a multi-entity participating agreement) to work in a common landscape toward a common end. Partners in a

landscape can collaboratively build a coherent concept, piecing together various partners' strengths to drive effective outcomes at scale. Getting multiple partners together to respond collectively, though, could require some capacity funding.

When it comes to engaging and communicating with tribes, space must also be made for government-to-government consultation, with recognition of oral traditions and cultural values.

Partner Roles

Partners bear the role of helping federal agencies apply funding into implementation on the ground. Agencies need partners to help with efforts related to science (including providing mapping capacity), communication, facilitation, conflict mitigation, and other similar skills. Much needed capacity would direct money, create co-governance structures, and among other needs. Convenors, coordinators, networks, and bridging entities are essential; with lots of money to be distributed, investments in coordination are vital to wrangle the range of efforts into a shared vision for the landscape. Many pieces must align at the ground level to make projects successful, heightening the importance of not only coordination, but also of redundancy – different treatments, acres, and partners that can ensure objectives are achieved even when some steps along the way may fall through.

Partners can include local governments, state and federal agencies, fire response units, tribes and pueblos, utilities, NGOs, and others. Analyses of partner actions in some landscapes that are fairly well-resourced in terms of capacity have identified a range of different partner roles, including:

- Community outreach (e.g., workshops and educational events);
- Funding (e.g., grant writing, providing funding or in-kind support);
- Meetings and agreements (e.g., convening people, creating MOUs, having interconnected networks and communication);
- Scientific expertise (e.g., training, monitoring, research, mapping);
- Project planning (e.g., supporting development of burn plans, conducting environmental analyses); and
- Project implementation (the biggest category of how partners contributed – e.g., training, landscape work).

No one actor needs to perform all those functions on a landscape, but it is important to coordinate efforts and to make connections where there is adjacent work.

Many partners are skilled at helping to span boundaries and communicate across multitudes of other organizations. Such skills will continue to be a particularly crucial bridging any gaps with partners that have place-based missions and those that work at a larger scale, are more regional or cross-boundary approach. Networks and partnerships can serve to coordinate among 1) local

efforts and in prioritizing across larger landscapes, 2) organizations working across scales in regional-level discussions, and 3) groups working on the ground can help with stacking of investments in landscapes. In some case, the soft infrastructure already exists for bringing networks together at various scales and serve as effective communication hubs.

Federal agencies often have capacity and institutional challenges related to communications and outreach (e.g., the hierarchy of line officers can inhibit communication). Partners including philanthropic partners, can help bridge the gap in providing communications capacity. Small investments in good, locally generated stories that involve people connected to their landscapes can feed the appetite that exists for materials that can be directly used and picked up by media. Existing networks and resources (e.g., incident management teams, public information officer shops) can be tapped to get messaging into the minds of people putting talking points together, for example when an incident occurs. In addition to communications for the public, there is need for philanthropic support for practitioners to utilize existing or create new pathways to share knowledge with one another.

The philanthropic community likely has greater capacity than agencies to be creative and bring flexible money to the table, but the philanthropic community is just beginning to engage in the wildfire resilience space. Many in the philanthropic community are interested in fire and have dealt with it in the context of conservation, but they are only just starting to grapple with wildfire resilience as a standalone area. It is a complex space, without easy answers or easy grantees, and it is not clear where governmental funding responsibility ends and private funding responsibilities begin. Thus foundations can be useful partners in this area, but the more that partners can come up with tangible funding needs that philanthropy can fill, the better.

NGOs can be partners that fill a variety of roles. For instance, NGOs could be good convenors for coalitions or collaborative groups of tribes in regions to enable them to meet and share tribal challenges, needs, and priorities. NGOs can also be problem solvers and innovators, potentially on key issues such as prescribed fire insurance and liability.

Workforce Issues

To get good fire – including prescribed fire – back into key landscapes, we need to solve the workforce shortage challenge. The fire suppression workforce will not solve the prescribed fire problem. The infrastructure bill provides funding both directly and indirectly for prescribed fire and additionally provides funding to for increase salaries for the firefighting/suppression workforce, a workforce which has often been viewed as the prescribed fire or restoration workforce outside of wildfire seasons. This funding could support transitioning seasonal federal firefighters into permanent ones, but this would not account for the mix of federal, state, county, and municipal workers. Additionally, fire seasons are such that they have become year-round. On top of that, there is an incredible amount of stress in fire suppression work, people are leaving the industry, and many are not interested in this work year-round. Federal officials are also not adequately recognizing the differences between the timber and fire industries.

Creating a dedicated prescribed fire workforce is needed on par with (but not identical to) the suppression workforce. Prescribed fire work is less stressful than wildfire suppression work, may not involve being away from family as frequently (because the work is nationwide, not just western), and can help provide equitable opportunities across the country.

Workers are also hard to find, for prescribed fire and other forest management needs. The workforce is far behind where it needs to be given the influx of federal funding. While the U.S. has emphasized four-year college degrees, it may have come at the expense of developing avocational workforce. Recently, there has been a decline in four-year university enrollments and increased programs for vocational activities (e.g., truck drivers, heavy machinery operators, repair/mechanics). The new challenge will be ensuring that this workforce is compensated competitively to further ensure retention for a long-term workforce. Tribes, for example, can find it especially hard to pull workers straight from college to meet capacity needs, as those graduates often prefer federal jobs and the associated benefits.

Even if the workforce is developed, other workforce hurdles still exist, for example finding and retaining qualified employees. Logging truck drivers, for instance, also have opportunities as Amazon truck drivers, and many sectors are competing for communicators and managers. In addition, for federal agencies it can take a long time, sometimes years, to staff up. That might be an opportunity for NGOs and other organizations with more nimble hiring processes to bridge the gap in the short term until some positions (from the coordinator level to technicians) can be filled.