

Briefing Paper

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Identifying Communities at Risk and Prioritizing Risk-Reduction Projects

A briefing paper from the
National Association of State Foresters
prepared by the Forest Fire Protection Committee



Purpose

Identifying communities at risk and prioritizing projects to reduce wildfire risk is a national effort. A consistent vision is necessary to meet congressional intent, mandates and directives and to effectively reduce the effects of wildfires on communities. This paper is intended to provide national guidance for identifying communities at risk, conducting planning efforts that are consistent with national initiatives, and to reinforce the role of the National Association of State Foresters (NASF) in setting priorities, effecting progress, and measuring success toward reduction of wildfire risk for America's communities.

Defining a Community at Risk

The initial 2003 NASF guidance defined a community as "a group of people living in the same locality and under the same government" (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 1969). A community is considered at risk from wildland fire if it lies within the wildland/urban interface as defined in the federal register (*Federal Register Vol. 66, No. 3, Pages 751-754, January 4, 2001*). Unfortunately neither definition for community nor wildland urban interface lends itself to a spatial analysis using geographic information systems. In order to map communities at risk, geographic risk assessments have chosen a combination of housing density and census data as a starting point for identifying communities. Each state should consider the practicality of using this method for their purposes and further refine mapping of communities based on local knowledge. The number of communities, community boundaries, and wildland urban interface are so dynamic that strict definitions and inventories are generally not applicable. A flexible and expandable approach to identifying communities and addressing risk may be necessary in some areas.

Identifying Communities at Risk

Communities at risk (or alternately, landscapes of similar risk) have been identified on a state-by-state basis with the involvement of organizations with wildland fire protection responsibilities (state, local, tribal, and federal) along with other interested cooperators, partners, and stakeholders. Generally accepted risk-assessment methods include historical analysis of wildfire occurrence and behavior, values at risk, and fire management capacity. States are expected to provide appropriate community risk analysis and to identify not only levels of risk but causes of risk that may be addressed through priority projects. In some locations this has been done on a geographic basis. Although there is no uniform, national hazard or risk assessment process, there are a number of valid assessment processes in individual states or regions. Communities who identify themselves—or self-declare—through recognized planning and mitigation processes should also be recognized.

The Role of Regional Wildfire Risk Assessments

Regional wildfire risk assessments provide comprehensive data and consistency in the national recognition of risk. The southern region has completed the Southern Wildfire Risk Assessment (<http://www.southernwildfirerisk.com>) and it is anticipated that the western region and northeastern area will complete similar assessments by 2012. As geographic region risk assessments develop, increased numbers of communities are identified using consistent criteria. Since 2007 the number of identified communities at risk has increased nationally from 51,612 to 69,930 in 2009. It is very likely that geographic regional wildfire risk assessments, using somewhat consistent criteria, will identify many additional communities at risk in the wildland urban interface. Significant increases in the number of communities identified pose serious implications for the effort needed to produce and sustain an acceptable number of Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs).

Prioritization will play the key role. Projects, not communities, should be prioritized based on probability of success, efficiency through community involvement and collaboration, and on sustainability. However, wildfire risk will be the key principle used in identifying projects from the outset. As the challenges of addressing communities at risk increase, the process may become more focused on additional mitigation measures that address actual risk—fire prevention, forest resource management, and Firewise principles.

Community Wildfire Protection Plans

CWPPs are a proven, successful tool to address the challenges of the wildland urban interface in a way that brings about comprehensive and locally supported solutions. The continued success of CWPPs requires dedicated and focused leadership, collaboration, and long-term financial commitment. NASF will continue to support implementation of CWPPs and monitor and report on the national CWPP effort.

Increased efforts to produce and implement CWPPs should be complimented with a parallel effort to communicate accomplishments to Congress and other benefactors.

Commitments and Expectations

1. *Identification:* Each state will determine how many communities are at risk or alternately identify landscapes of similar risk and will establish methodology for assessing community risk. Statewide Forest Resource Assessments will also aid in determining priority areas of wildfire risk. To determine communities at risk, each state should:

- Include all lands and all ownerships.
- Use a collaborative process that is consistent with the complexity of land ownership patterns, resource management issues, and the number of interested stakeholders.
- Report the number of communities at risk on a gradient scale of low, moderate, and high.

It is recommended that states not overlook isolated, rural communities or counties which may not be organized well enough to effectively advocate on their own behalf.

2. *Prioritization:* NASF strongly promotes Community Wildfire Protection Planning and encourages each state to prioritize community wildfire risk reduction projects based on nationally publicized risk-assessment methods and on community, state, or regional risk assessments. The intent of the risk assessment process is to compare relative risk to communities from wildfire within a state, not to compare wildfire risk to communities between or among states.

Using available mitigation plans, CWPPs, or another similar analysis process, federal, state and local agencies and tribes will each annually examine the lands under its own ownership or jurisdiction and, with the involvement of all interested parties, identify high priority areas for conducting fuels reduction, ecosystem restoration, and other projects that have the potential to reduce the risk to a specific community or communities.

3. *Collaboration:* Federal, state and local governments should collaborate across jurisdictions with a variety of partners and plan community risk reduction projects that compliment surrounding jurisdictions. Approval of projects at the state level or federal regional level should take into account the value of collaborative projects. States should initiate this collaboration annually or on a continuing basis. County government should be involved in CWPP development and in establishing priorities at the county level. Community projects should support local needs and also be connected to national strategies when possible. Sharing success stories will help to promote the process.

4. Implementation

- Set priorities by utilizing assessment information and evaluation of projects, not by ranking communities.
- Prioritize and document projects through the Community Wildfire Protection Plan process or other state mitigation planning processes.

5. *Accomplishments Reporting:* Documenting, illustrating, and communicating accomplishments serves to justify finances for important wildfire programs. Appropriators are looking for broad numbers on communities at risk, communities served, and increases in capacity, and reductions of risk. Program managers are expecting success stories, which can be simple, matter of fact documentation of a completed project or projects. They can illustrate models of partnerships and collaboration. Success stories can also be sensational examples of communities faced with catastrophic fire but saved by planning, readiness, and risk reduction projects. States will work with federal partners to ensure necessary and appropriate reporting processes are in place to communicate progress. Local community projects should support national strategy.

Communities should be mapped for spatial analysis and to illustrate projects and a mechanism for tracking and reporting per Statewide Forest Resource Assessments and current national standards.

5. *Maintenance*: It is not only important to lower the risk to communities, but once the risk has been reduced, to maintain those communities at a reduced risk. It is important to promote local community involvement and increase awareness of responsibility to reduce risk by developing and implementing community wildfire protection planning which is appropriate to the level of risk and capacity of the community.

Recognizing that the condition of the vegetation (fuel) on the landscape is dynamic and that the resilience of communities to wildfire varies widely and changes over time, it is not only important and necessary to complete statewide and community assessments, but also to periodically complete re-assessments. The frequency of re-assessments will vary considerably across the country depending upon fuel types and climate. Updates to state wildfire assessments should collect recent data from locally developed CWPPs, such as Wildland Urban Interface boundary changes, adjusted priority areas due to fire, treatments, etc. If there are land ownerships that cross state lines (for example Indian Reservations or single, National Forests), it is important to coordinate the risk assessment process with neighboring state(s) to ensure consistency in classification.

References

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- 2) *Memorandum of Understanding for the Development of a Collaborative Fuels Treatment Program*. January 13, 2003. (Available at: <http://www.fireplan.gov/reports>).
- 3) *Concept Paper: Communities at Risk*. National Association of State Foresters, December 2, 2002. (Available at: <http://www.stateforesters.org/reports>).
- 4) *Wildland/Urban Interface Fire Hazard Assessment Methodology*. NWCG, undated (circa 1997). (Available through the NWCG Publications Management System (PMS), NIFC Catalog number NFES 1597.)
- 5) *Template For National Fire Plan Success Stories*. (Available on Colorado State University website at http://csfs.colostate.edu/pdfs/Golden_Inventory_Management_Plan.pdf)
- 6) *Preparing a Community Wildfire Protection Plan: A Handbook for Wildland–Urban Interface Communities*. Sponsored by the Communities Committee, National Association of Counties, National Association of State Foresters, Society of American Foresters, and Western Governors’ Association, March 2004. (Available at <http://www.stateforesters.org/files/cwpphandbook.pdf>)
- 7) *Communities at Risk: Commitments and Expectations*, National Association of State Foresters, January 2006.
- 8) *Implementation and Monitoring of Community Wildfire Protection Plans*. National Association of State Foresters, January 2009. (<http://www.stateforesters.org/node/1052>)
- 9) *2009 Quadrennial Fire Review*, USDA Forest Service (<http://www.nifc.gov/QFR/QFR2009Final.pdf>)
- 10) *Field Guidance: Identifying and Prioritizing Communities at Risk*, National Association of State Foresters, June 2003.