

The National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy: Phase III Western Regional Science-Based Risk Analysis Report

Prepared by the Western Regional Strategy Committee

Executive Summary

The National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy: Phase III Western Regional Science-Based Risk Analysis Report (Western Regional Risk Report) has been developed by representatives of federal, state, local, and tribal governments, interested governmental and non-governmental organizations, businesses and industries to comprehensively address issues relating to wildland fire in the West. The Western Regional Strategy Committee (WRSC) was developed to provide inclusiveness and transparency to stakeholders in the process of addressing the wildland fire challenge, while focusing on the three goals of the Cohesive Strategy: Restoring and Maintaining Resilient Landscapes, Creating Fire Adapted Communities, and Responding to Wildfires. Stakeholder input has been instrumental in forming the risk analysis and alternatives to address the wildland fire management issues in the 17 Western states.

The Western landscape is diverse and reaches from the plains states of Kansas and Nebraska to Hawaii, Alaska and the western pacific islands such as Guam and American Samoa. This diverse landscape creates strengths and weaknesses. One identified weakness concerns availability of data across all lands. A need for data from our island partners and Alaska has been identified, and the Western region will work to address this need in the future.

The Western Region contains a vast amount of land administered by federal agencies, which creates opportunities and challenges. The West has significant wildland fire risks from overstocked fuel conditions, insects and disease, invasive species, and urban development in wildland urban interface areas (WUI). Restoring landscapes to a healthy,

resilient state would generate important environmental and social benefits, create much-needed jobs and revenue for rural economies, and lead to tremendous cost savings in wildfire suppression efforts.

The *Western Regional Risk Report* aims to explore and characterize strategies that stakeholders, communities, agencies and all partners can use to address the three goals. The maps and charts in this document give us a generalized picture across the entire region, while identifying existing biophysical and social conditions and relationships among factors. The analysis shows us where fires are occurring, where future fires are likely to occur, and where we might be able to intervene with mitigation efforts to reduce fuels to reduce the severity of future fires. The landscape needs active management to reduce fuels in order to reduce losses of homes, lives, and resources to wildfire. Experience with fuels treatment projects has demonstrated the value of fuels reduction to reduce suppression costs and protect land and resources, and the importance of collaborative groups, which bring a variety of stakeholders to the table to forge agreements on how to restore landscapes and reduce wildfire risk.

The risk analysis in this report summarizes three alternatives in relation to the three Cohesive Strategy goals and social, economic, and ecological conditions. This Phase III effort builds on the Phase II *Western Regional Assessment and Strategy Report*. The National Science Analysis Team has assembled a library of data and tools that can be used to inform decision-makers in making land management choices.

As part of the Cohesive Strategy planning process, the Western Regional Strategy Committee reviewed and analyzed the data to refine Alternatives 1, 2 and 3, which represent three different focus areas to address in the future development of specific Action Plans. Like the three goals, the three alternatives are not mutually exclusive. Resilient landscapes, fire adapted communities, and improved fire response work together to mitigate the risk of wildfire. There is no one preferred alternative to be applied across the West. Rather, the three alternatives present investment options that are believed to

offer the greatest positive impact. The value of employing a blend of the goals and alternatives has applicability across the vast geographic landscape of the West.

- Alternative #1 emphasizes landscape resiliency and recommends activities that contribute to improvements in forest and rangeland health.
- Alternative #2 emphasizes fire-adapted communities in which all stakeholders and affected publics are collaboratively engaged in protecting communities and WUI residents from wildland fire and in fulfilling a stewardship role for their surrounding landscape.
- Alternative #3 emphasizes increased stakeholder effectiveness in risk-based wildland fire response that enhances the effectiveness of firefighter and public safety.

Recommendations

Following from the alternatives are recommendations to address each alternative, plus overarching recommendations that address all facets of the Cohesive Strategy. The following recommendations are broad based.

Overarching Recommendations

- Recognize the depth and importance of the communications framework and provide resources to implement communications recommendations, as it establishes the foundation of our collaborative process.
- Ensure the coordinated implementation of the Cohesive Strategy among all stakeholders.
- Enhance collaboration through incentives.
- Emphasize landscape treatments where existing collaborative groups have agreed in principle on management objectives and areas for treatment, and encourage and facilitate the establishment of collaborative groups.
- Expand collaborative land management, community and fire response opportunities across all jurisdictions, and invest in programmatic actions and activities that can be facilitated by Tribes and partners under the Indian Self-Determination and

Education Act (as amended), the Tribal Forest Protection Act, and other existing authorities in coordination with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

- Address identified barriers and promote critical success factors across the region and at all levels.
- Provide resources to support local government officials, such as fire chiefs, in the integration of the Cohesive Strategy into their communities and operations – i.e., support the development of an International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) Leaders’ Guide for the Cohesive Strategy.
- Formalize a comparative risk model that includes federal, state, and local costs. Use the model to complete a trade off analysis and establish a risk base point.
- Establish the use of the model, including training and data descriptions for local decision makers, such as counties. Facilitate local updates to the models to enable updates to the national models.
- Identify data gaps and inconsistencies, including describing the purpose of the data in monitoring and evaluating progress to accomplishing the goals of the Cohesive Strategy. Prioritize action toward addressing gaps and inconsistencies.

Landscape Resiliency Recommendations

- Encourage US Forest Service and Department of the Interior/Bureau of Land Management to use existing authorities under Healthy Forest Restoration Act, Healthy Forest Initiative, and other contracting authorities to expedite fuels treatments. Assess what is currently being spent on these tools and increase that amount. Project criteria to be worked out during action planning may include: Project has to be 5,000 acres or larger, reduces risk to landscapes and/or communities by focusing on areas that have a high burn probability or departure; has to be initiated within 2 years; and is based on collaborative processes.
- Explore data to identify and prioritize landscapes for treatment. This information would be provided to sub-geographical stakeholders, decision makers, as well as state and federal officials for their consideration and use.

- Expedite coordinated identification, prioritization, and restoration of damaged landscapes as a result of natural disturbances including, insect/disease, hurricanes, wildfire, invasives, changing climatic conditions. Identify where investments are not likely to restore areas to assist in prioritization of resources.
- Work with Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) in developing categorical exclusions for landscape restoration.
- Where appropriate, utilize CEQ alternative arrangements when restoring damaged landscapes as a result of natural disturbances.
- Examine legislative related barriers that are impeding implementation of collaboratively developed landscape health related projects and pursue reform of the existing process to increase our effectiveness in active forest and rangeland management. (e.g., Endangered Species Act, Equal Access to Justice Act, National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)). Encourage and enlist local, state, tribal, and federal environmental regulatory agency representatives to participate actively in collaborative efforts to restore resilient landscapes.

Fire Adapted Communities Recommendations

- Accelerate achievement of fire adapted communities using existing tools; offer incentives, such as chipping/disposal and incentives for collaboration, etc.
- Enhance campaigns to educate the public about the urgent need for homeowners to take action, including having statewide, Western, and other coordinated campaigns. Use videos such as how to protect homes from fire, the importance of fire in nature, and the need to live with fire.
- Facilitate shared learning among communities for fire adaptation.
- Continue to create and update Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs) using Secure Rural Schools Community Self-Determination Act and identify new funding sources. Be sure to include offices of emergency management and local response entities, such as the sheriff's office in planning efforts. Update CWPPs in areas that have had a wildfire event.

- Review and modify requirements for technical and financial support of communities through Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), i.e. NEPA administrative processes, and applications for funding.
- Develop and promote local collaborative capacities to implement fuels treatments and respond to fires.

Fire Response Recommendations

- Improve response effectiveness by convening state level groups to identify where fire protection exists for all areas within each state. Eliminate unprotected areas by establishing/extending jurisdictional responsibilities. Response cooperators in each state should identify those voids and negotiate to ensure that every acre within the state has designated protection. Promote realignment of protection responsibilities to the organization that is best suited to provide protection (e.g., block protection areas, offset protection agreements, protection contracts).
- Improve firefighter and public safety. Maintain and/or improve an aggressive human caused ignition prevention program. Involve all stakeholders in the prevention campaign.
- Integrate local, state, federal, and tribal response capacity. Identify where the greatest opportunities exist in communications, training, qualifications, mobilization, and instruments.
- Increase capacity where necessary in order to improve overall local response effectiveness and reduce the need for external (non-local) resources.

Next Steps

The Western Region will use the Phase III report in conjunction with the objectives outlined in the Phase II report, *A National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy: Western Regional Assessment and Strategy* to develop a Regional Action Plan that addresses the needs of landscapes, communities at risk, and fire response. The Action Plan will be developed with stakeholder input, in an inclusive and transparent process, and will be completed in early 2013.

Experience has shown us that collaboration does not spontaneously happen. It requires structure, process, focus, and resources. To that end, the next step for the Western Region is to establish a coordination structure that will exist under the umbrella of the Wildland Fire Executive Council (WFEC). This structure will facilitate the broad scale implementation of the recommendations identified in the Western Regional Risk Report.

It is envisioned that the structure will be a coordinating body, composed of representatives of the decision-making and jurisdictional authorities in the West. This regional coordinating body will need resources, a full-time staff lead, and a communications component. It is recommended that these resources be acquired through new or existing agreements with the Western Governors' Association and/or Western Forestry Leadership Coalition. The objective of the coordinating body will be to facilitate the development of the action plan and its implementation, provide consistent communications with stakeholders, and foster true collaboration.

At the national level, Phase III will continue with development of a national risk analysis and a national action plan. The NSAT will develop a comparative risk model using the data sets, and will develop a national trade-off analysis. When the comparative risk and trade-off analyses are complete, a National Phase III Risk Analysis Report will be written to bring together the issues and alternatives discussed in the three regional reports. A National Action Plan will be developed based on the national risk and trade-off analyses.

