

Interpreting federal Policy at the local level: The case of the wildland-urban interface in community wildfire protection planning

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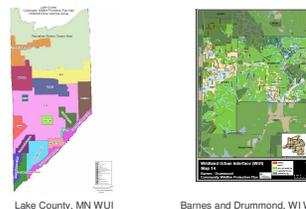
Issue

In 2003, the Healthy Forests Restoration Act called for at-risk communities across the U.S. to develop Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs), which require local, state and federal actors to work together to address fuels reduction and wildfire preparedness. CWPPs can provide the opportunity for local government to influence actions on adjacent public land, by establishing local boundaries of the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI), the area where urban lands meet or intermix with wildlands. We evaluated this policy incentive in Eastern U.S. CWPPs by examining whether collaboration is evident in local interpretation of the Wildland-Urban Interface.

Results

Agency partners, local government and 3rd party planning groups influence use of WUI

- Plans with federal partners were more likely to define WUI.
- Some states worked with specific templates and scales.
- Local government and local fire departments provided local knowledge and political influence over the WUI:
"[The county commissioner] also wanted [the wildland urban interface] big because he's, you know, he's thinking problem assessments, problems and solutions."
- Presence of a 3rd party planning group increased technical and GIS influence regarding WUI development.



Conclusions and Recommendations

- Communities are interpreting HFRA with tremendous variation at the local level
- State and federal government agencies play a vital role in CWPP development
- WUI policy incentive is not utilized in all communities; land ownership patterns and population density make identifying the WUI more difficult in the East
- Identifying the WUI gives communities and agencies an opportunity to make management distinctions between lived space and public lands
- As the wildland-urban interface continues to expand and change, we may see an evolution of the use of the WUI concept in the context of planning

Methods

This research is part of a national project investigating context, process, and outcomes of wildfire planning in 15 CWPP communities across the United States. To address our research questions related to the WUI, we used two methods of data collection and analyses:

Document Review

To obtain CWPPs for the document review, we conducted an internet search and made phone/email contact with state officials. Plans had to include the three entities required by HFRA:



CWPPs often included additional partners such as federal land management agencies like the U.S. Forest Service. All reviewed plans were completed after 2004. We coded available CWPPs for study variables including: 1) scale of the plan, 2) participants in the plan, 3) use of the WUI concept, and 4) identification of WUI or interface areas. While 44 plans were obtained, 29 were used for document review because they met all the research qualifications.

Case studies

We conducted 57 in-depth interviews with key informants in four Eastern CWPP communities: **Lake County, Minnesota**; **Barnes and Drummond, Wisconsin**; **High Knob** in Front Royal, VA; and **Taylor, Florida**. Participants were selected based on meeting attendance, and information provided by the CWPP facilitators. On average, we were able to talk with about 85% of CWPP participants in each case study. Interviews were hand coded for themes and factors related to the WUI.

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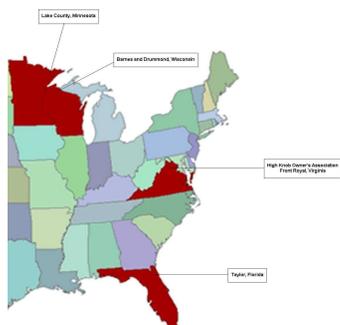
Research Questions

How is the wildland-urban interface concept used in CWPPs?

What factors influence the WUI definition and designation?

Do communities redefine the terms and boundaries of the WUI to meet local needs?

Case Study Locations



Funding provided by:



and

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Flexible policy leads to diverse CWPPs

- Plans ranged from wildfire hazard assessments completed pre-HFRA to Firewise plans to stand alone CWPPs.
- Several CWPPs served dual planning purposes, such as Firewise Communities/USA plans, and FEMA hazard mitigation plans.
- The wildland-urban interface was used or addressed in just over half of the reviewed CWPPs.
- Plans were developed at four planning scales, using a number of template typologies.

Use of the WUI in some Eastern Community Wildfire Protection Plans

Template	Planning Scales			
	County	Multiple Township	City/Township	Subdivision
Southeast (VA, AR, KY, FL)	Used WUI (1)		Used WUI (5) No WUI (5)	No WUI (4)
Texas				No WUI (4)
Minnesota	Used WUI (3)			
Ohio/Pennsylvania	Used WUI (1)	Used WUI (1)	Used WUI (1)	
No template-unique				
• Barnes/Drummond, WI		Used WUI (1)		
• Berlin, NH			Used WUI (1)	
• Stillwater, MN			Used WUI (1)	
• Potomac Vistas, MD				No WUI (1)
Total Plans	Used WUI (5)	Used WUI (2)	Used WUI (8) No WUI (5)	No WUI (9)
Total plans that uses WUI = 15			Total plans that did NOT use WUI = 14	

Scale and template influence

- Larger scale plans tended to use the WUI concept:
"We wanted to cover most of the county with some sort of WUI... wherever we thought that there might be an area that some work needed to be done, we wanted that to be included within a wildland-urban interface area"
- While subdivision level plans did not:
"... I probably didn't use [the WUI]... Like I say, I go in and I sit down and talk with these communities as if we're sitting around your table and talking."
- Templates had tremendous influence. They dictated whether and how a community identified WUI areas.