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Collaborating for Healthy Forests and Communities: A Guide for Building Partnerships Among Diverse Interests

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A companion to the video program *Collaborating for Healthy Forests and Communities: Building Partnerships Among Diverse Interests*

Where it's Working: Colville, Washington

As concern over forest health and the threat of wildfire continues to grow in the Western United States, communities—once divided over single issues—are coming together to work on solutions that serve multiple interests. One place where such activities have matured is in Washington State, where over the past ten years the Northeast Washington Forestry Coalition (NEWFC) and the Colville National Forest have built an effective relationship. NEWFC represents citizens and organized groups in the Tri-County area of the Northeast corner of Washington State, over which the Colville NF is spread.

The community of Colville recognized the risks of continuing to do business the "same old way." Citizens saw their rural economy shrinking, the health of surrounding forests threatened, and recognized that an inability to reach agreement was largely to blame. Through NEWFC, community leaders learned to communicate their concerns and use existing resources to advance a variety of goals—including large-scale fuels reduction projects and active forest management—most of it on national forest lands.

An especially pivotal event was a three-day workshop hosted by the Colville National Forest. The Forest Supervisor hired professional facilitators to guide a discussion about collaborative processes, as well the legal requirements and constraints to which the agency must adhere. Coalition members affirmed the workshop was instrumental in helping them understand the context of Forest Service planning processes, legal requirements, and agency directives. The workshop gave both agency personnel and the Coalition a starting point by demonstrating skills for open communication and collaboration. The agency did not forego its commitment to the more traditional NEPA process, but the Coalition provided a place for discussion organized around a core subset of community concerns and directed by local leaders.

Members take pride in noting that formerly opposing interests are now represented within NEWFC. They acknowledge forest conservation is not possible without timber harvest, and sustainable harvest levels are not possible without supporting the needs and concerns of the environmental community. At the same time, they recognize the need and challenge of bringing additional perspectives to the table.

Moving forward, turnover in agency leadership and key community leaders will likely pose a challenge for the Coalition. As these individuals depart, they take with them a certain amount of history and knowledge of the process. The individuals who follow behind them must rebuild and renegotiate important relationships. Participants express optimism the group will weather these events, suggesting they have sufficiently established a culture of collaboration. In the words of one Coalition member:

We're doing everything we can to be logical, reasonable, use common sense, build relationships, build trust–from the ground up–even among historical antagonists who used to hate each other and be appalled by each others' perspectives.

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Why a partnership?

There are many reasons for building an alliance among agencies and citizens in forest and rangeland communities. In the big picture, the purpose is primarily to reach decisions that are objectively better. Essentially, the quality of decisions is improved by a multi-agency effort that includes a role for citizens and an environment in which all can interact. From a practical standpoint, a collaborative approach provides the best strategy for restoring and maintaining healthy landscapes. Partnerships offer opportunities to experiment with management approaches, capitalize on local knowledge, and build support for decisions.

Examples of working partnerships can be found in a wide-range of management settings. There is no single formula for building a partnership; however, through extensive research, we have found a set of characteristics that are common to most partnership success stories. They are described in this guide to be used as a practical reference for agency personnel and citizens who seek to improve collaborative efforts in local communities.

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This field guide is a companion to the video program *Collaborating for Healthy Forests and Communities: Building Partnerships Among Diverse Interests*. The video showcases on-the-ground experiences of federal and state land managers, as well as community leaders, who are working together to overcome barriers, find agreement, and build partnerships. The field guide provides more detail and a practical approach that managers and local citizens can use to adapt the most useful tools and strategies to the needs of their own community.

For copies of the DVD, or additional copies of this guide, contact the Joint Fire Science Program (www.firescience.gov) or Bruce Shindler (Bruce.Shindler@oregonstate.edu) at Oregon State University.

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Management Context

Forest and range health, along with wildfire, currently dominate management decisions on public lands across much of the United States. A common focal point is often at the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). Changing conditions on the ground, as well as government directives such as the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, the National Fire Plan, and more recently the Cohesive Wildfire Management Strategy, are prompting agency personnel and the public to work together. Local participants are using terms like "partnership" and "coalition" to describe these collaborative working relationships. Their efforts focus on a variety of management activities—from fuels reduction programs, to stewardship contracting, biomass utilization, and control of invasive species. In post-fire situations, programs target goals for restoration and rehabilitation. Regardless of the specific objective, these agency-citizen collaborations often result in a healthier landscape and more stable conditions for planning and decision-making.

In this guide we describe a set of common strategies that have led to functional, working partnerships in local communities. The guide provides practical approaches and specific tools for implementation. It is organized in a step-wise approach so that managers, along with citizens, can choose their own jumping-in point and adjust their program accordingly. Our intent is to provide useful ideas to help agency personnel and community members overcome barriers and find agreement as they build their own partnership.

Collaborative Action

Collaboration comes in many forms and can be initiated by any agency or organization. For example, partnerships can be driven by community members with local and federal agencies participating among many stakeholders to work toward common goals. Alternatively, a collaborative effort can be an agency driven process that is open to other interested parties and where personnel provide leadership to reach decisions that are widely supported.

Many existing collaborative groups were initially organized around forest health concerns, particularly the threat of wildfire to forest and rangeland communities. At the local level, individuals from across the management spectrum—agencies, residents, environmental and industry groups—have recognized the stakes are just too high *not* to work together. Taking a proactive, collaborative approach provides the best opportunity to restore and maintain landscapes.

A well organized strategy to create fire-adapted communities offers options and opportunities to engage stakeholders. As more fires occur and the problems become more complex, partners are targeting three distinct, yet related phases of forest health and fire management:

- pre-fire activities—planning and implementing fuels reduction on public lands, fire-wise activities on private land, maintaining wildlife habitat
- during-fire activities—suppression activities, evacuation decisions

- post-fire actions—immediate safety concerns, salvage operations where appropriate, planning for restoration and other long-term programs

For decades suppression activities have dominated fire management programs. As a result, a highly sophisticated and highly successful fire-fighting force that incorporates agency personnel from all levels of government is now in place. Pre-fire and post-fire actions are less well coordinated across organizations; agencies have a history of working independently in these phases. Budget constraints limit capabilities and, in many places, reaching agreement with stakeholders can be difficult to achieve. But by almost any measure, the agency-citizen relationship across all three phases of fire is critical to success. For example, the ability to plan for post-fire recovery is directly related to pre-fire interactions and cooperation in communities, and is influenced by decisions and events that take place during the fire.

There is little doubt that finding acceptable solutions has become more complex as objectives expand beyond a "fire-safe WUI" to include concerns for forest health, recreation and other amenity values, and economic stability in local communities. Now, more than ever before, attention to building relationships is necessary for successful decision-making at all stages of management. Government agencies, commercial interests, and citizen groups may have different ideas and priorities, but most agree the least preferred option is doing nothing at all. As a result, partnerships are forming that target local problems.

Researchers Evaluate Interactions and Highlight Success

Over the last decade, largely since implementation of the National Fire Plan, university and agency scientists have worked closely with management personnel and citizen leaders throughout the country to evaluate their collaborative efforts. This research indicates there is no single formula for "getting it right." Building a partnership does not always follow the same path. Instead, successful groups usually combine a suite of factors to forge a working relationship. These factors often depend on the local setting—in fact, paying attention to site-specific social and environmental conditions is an essential ingredient. Looking across management settings and research findings, we have been able to identify a set of six important strategies that are applicable to most situations. This guide outlines these ideas, along with anticipated outcomes to help highlight the relevance of each action for stakeholders.

1. **Getting Organized: Coordinate the Agency Effort**
2. **Consider the Setting: Recognize Local Concerns and Assets**
3. **The Core Concept: Create a Collaborative Environment**
4. **Build a Foundation: Relationships are Built on Communication and Trust**
5. **Skilled Communicators: The Essential Ingredient**
6. **Make a Commitment: Plan for the Long-Term**

1. Getting Organized: Coordinate the Agency Effort

While collaborative groups do spring up from within communities, the most successful partnerships usually emerge from a coordinated multi-agency effort that brings together local, state, and federal personnel. We recognize it is important to involve citizen stakeholders early on, yet we suggest it is also important that agencies dedicate time in the beginning to assess their own internal abilities and limitations. This includes considering how efforts will be coordinated within and across agencies, as well as a joint plan for involving community members and other stakeholders.

Where does your organization stand?

One of the first steps in the coordination process is to assess the climate in your own organization for including multiple parties in planning and decision-making. Foremost is the strength of commitment that exists at administrative levels. For example, leaders can create an atmosphere that supports personnel in their efforts—which often involve experimenting with new ideas and taking a few risks. Managers operating on the front lines of partnership-building must know that outreach activities are a priority within their organization. They must have the freedom to experiment through trial and error, which also means being supported even when they make a mistake. Success can best be achieved when an organization understands and promotes multi-party relationships.

Learn to talk to one another.

Interagency cooperation also provides a framework for more strategic decision-making. For example, it is critical for agencies to work together to determine how decisions will be made, at what level, and the role each management organization will play. Some agencies may be better positioned than others to handle certain tasks or contribute differently to building partnerships. For instance, some national park units may have limited ability to contribute to tactical fire management operations, but have considerable skill in public outreach. This type of introspection also allows for discussion of the organizational constraints that come with every project. By acknowledging these limitations early in the process, their influence on outcomes can be more easily managed.

Not only is this form of internal discussion a good way to work out organizational kinks, it can foster an environment in which individuals can be heard. For example, on some National Forests those with good ideas are being encouraged to come forward in “barrier buster” sessions; essentially, addressing the question “what’s keeping us from getting our job done?” This promotes the notion that there should not be a penalty for talking about mistakes, pointing out things that don’t work, or asking for resources to accomplish the outreach job.

Make good use of your resources.

New directives that encourage interagency collaboration point to the value of a team approach. For example, an interagency team can draw from a broader range of key contacts and existing relationships with community groups. Considering internal resources also can help identify personnel who are best suited for public interaction and organizing diverse interests. In most cases, these are individuals who already have established credibility and trust in the community. For instance, in many locations personnel from local fire departments are recognized as providing useful and credible information. They are familiar with local issues and concerns and have built rapport with neighborhood groups. Coordinating the agency message is an effective way to promote programs because the public does not always differentiate between agency boundaries and management responsibilities.

With a coordinated strategy, agencies are better positioned to consider the community's concerns and clearly show how multiple parties can work together. This also means acknowledging good ideas and letting the public know how their input will be used. It is equally important, though often overlooked, to discuss why ideas cannot be used. Reconciling public expectations with limited agency resources can be difficult. But doing so in the beginning will allow personnel to better communicate what is possible, and what is not, so community members are more aware of the role they can realistically play.

Gary Roysdon

Anticipated Outcomes

- When the strength of agencies is integrated, the power of the team (and its work) can be legitimized throughout the organization.
- Interagency planning results in a decision-making structure that makes sense to the community, particularly as citizens see managers speaking with a unified voice.
- Miscommunication and turf battles will likely dissipate as agencies accomplish the job together.
- It becomes easier for citizens to have a role in planning processes.
- As personnel are given latitude for planning outreach activities they gain more authority to provide leadership.
- Greater recognition is given for teamwork as well as personnel who possess critical communication and partnership-building skills.

2. Consider the Setting: Recognize Local Concerns and Assets

In many communities, the most relevant problems are local problems. Anyone who participates has a personal interest. These include the condition of places people identify with and care about and also how people are represented in decisions about local resources. Partnerships help agencies focus on the values most relevant to communities, and can help citizens understand the range of considerations different government agencies must take into account.

Certainly managers need to maintain final decision authority, but working with community members on common concerns often results in more credible plans that are likely to garner broad support. For example, in several communities where partnerships now exist, citizens evolved from an initial hesitancy with forest thinning and prescribed fire programs to general agreement that agency use of these treatments—along with property owner actions—offer some of the best options to maintain fire-safe conditions. Such outcomes are possible when attention is given to how programs will change local conditions. This involves helping stakeholders express their concerns, demonstrating where specific practices are necessary, and showing how treatments will affect the landscape.

It's about people.

Ultimately, forest health and fire management programs are about much more than managing wildfires and protecting homes. At the core of these programs is the need to understand people and respond to their concerns. In addition to protecting their property, residents also may be concerned about popular recreation places, city watersheds, specific ecological conditions, or how all of these affect the local economy. These concerns are best acknowledged by getting into neighborhoods and meeting with people in their local setting. Accommodating a range of values can be challenging, but the importance of these issues within the community cannot be ignored.

Find the leaders.

Begin by recognizing work that has already been done by individuals in the community or is underway in local organizations. This includes seeking out people who are respected leaders. Simply put—today's natural resource problems are too big for anyone to tackle alone. It is logical to work with others to jointly develop projects community members care about. For example, local retired residents are often a good source of talent and can be helpful allies. From their professional careers, many have skills in organizing people and accomplishing project objectives. Look for these key individuals in local property owner associations, watershed councils, or "friends" groups where a stakeholder base already exists. Collaborative efforts encourage skilled community leaders to draw on their networks and build support for projects.

Encourage local initiative.

Take advantage of opportunities that bring people together. Ongoing projects or new activities can become the basis for productive relationships; even adversarial relationships can soften when people work together as a group. Most often, agencies will need to take a lead role—at least initially. At other times, managers may be able to add their voice to a group that already enjoys wide acceptance within the community. In some cases, managers can help provide essential information about a natural resource problem, or even provide instruction (or facilitate small grants) for getting a local job accomplished. With a bit of knowledge and encouragement, citizens are often willing to take the initiative themselves.

Local commercial interests also make valuable partners. They often provide the infrastructure necessary to accomplish project objectives. For example, local mills that can handle material from small diameter overstocked stands are essential to cost effective forest health programs. When agencies support the local economy it not only creates jobs, it gives projects a higher level of credibility within the community. A local focus can create a sense of ownership and a feeling of control among residents. At the same time, communities can become more resilient to wildfire, economic uncertainties, and other perceived threats.

Gary Roysdon

Anticipated Outcomes

- Recognizing and acknowledging local problems demonstrates a commitment to communities.
- When the emphasis is on issues important to citizens, stakeholders accept joint responsibility for creating a fire-safe landscape.
- Agency personnel can cultivate a group of willing partners who carry the message to others.
- Agency administrators often respond more readily to solutions when agreement is developed through community consensus.
- Supporting local interests helps support the local economy.
- Collaborative groups give people an opportunity to work directly with local resource managers on issues they care about.

3. The Core Concept: Create a Collaborative Environment

Collaboration is not just about holding a meeting or sharing a plan for review. It is about building relationships. Initially, collaboration is a focused effort to include multiple partners who have a stake in the outcomes. This involves getting to know people and understanding their views, giving everyone a chance to air their concerns or ideas, and creating an atmosphere in which individuals can find common values among many positions. In other words, a deliberative environment where consensus can take shape. This form of collaboration also means sharing some control over planning and public outreach. For example, groups already established for other purposes (i.e. watershed councils) may be logical partners for organizing rehabilitation plans after a fire event. Ultimately, this is about creating joint responsibility for maintaining local resources. Remember, the job is too big to tackle alone.

Start with people you know and trust.

Everyone has a small set of individuals they work with and who trust each another. These individuals reside within the agency and in the community at large. It makes sense to build on this goodwill and the working relationships that already exist. Recognize that most successful partnerships begin with single, usually small, local projects. Such efforts allow trust-building to occur and also for participants to gain familiarity with the many steps involved in agency decision-making.

New relationships will be established as others join in and the group goes through the process of adjusting to a new dynamic that reflects additional perspectives. In some cases, this relationship-building might be the single best early outcome—simply, people with diverse interests working together in a productive environment. It may take a while to get projects accomplished on the ground, but the goal of working together is that it will eventually pay off in agreement. Over time, the power of the group will get things accomplished; having struggled through the first one, other projects will be easier as you build on the experience.

Share the stage.

It is important that agency objectives are part of the agenda, but the agency does not always need to set the agenda. In true partnerships, ideas spring up from many sources. By sharing responsibilities with willing participants, the discussion will better reflect the community's immediate needs and concerns.

An important part of this conversation is to help all participants understand the planning—and eventually the decision-making—process. Each party will want to know where they stand, how they can weigh-in, and who will make the final decision. When that decision comes, everyone should recognize the terms of the agreement and how it was reached.

It's about people's values, not positions.

A useful lesson that comes from most successful collaborations is that the focus should be on what people value, not on their positions. Participants often come into a project with a firm hold on their traditional opinion (or position), but overcome this initial stance once discussion gets around to goals the group has in common. This shift comes from helping stakeholders identify the real problem they are concerned about as well as their true interest in what is at stake. For example, it might be as simple as recognizing that the threat of wildfire is everyone's concern. Instead of arguing over how something should be done (a specific management practice), the focus can be on what outcome is most desirable. This approach helps groups get past that us-versus-them mentality.

Bringing a diverse group of individuals together can be a difficult task. But it is important to remember each has an incentive to be there—and through deliberate discussion these incentives will often show overlapping values. These overlapping values are a gateway to agreement and a way to keep the discussion positive.

Be willing to set difficult issues aside.

Working on common problems will mean setting some issues aside. It is ultimately more valuable, particularly in the beginning, to build relationships and make progress than trying to solve every problem. For example, highly contentious projects can be deal breaking issues, especially for new start-up partnerships. Working on immediate problems that offer some room for reaching consensus is a more manageable task. In the beginning, positions and the usual arguments can get in the way, but this will change as key players learn about one another and discover mutual goals.

Also, regardless of the issue, it will be important for participants to agree on clear rules for keeping the process on track. Initially this involves the basics of meeting management, but also more focused attention to agreeing on the specific task, how to handle high-intensity discussion, and determining when to move on. Taking on the most difficult problems requires both procedural guidelines and experiencing some success along the way.

Anticipated Outcomes

- Stakeholders will see a collaborative approach as recognition that their opinions are valued and utilized.
- Community members can help identify trouble spots in need of active management.
- Partners can help prioritize tasks, reduce delays from lawsuits and conflict, and share the workload.
- This working style builds both community and agency capacity for reaching good decisions.
- Collaboration can become the normal way of doing business.

4. Build a Foundation: Relationships are Based on Communication and Trust

Over the past decade, researchers have focused on communication and trust-building strategies in communities. Much of what we know about groups comes from the same principles that keep our personal relationships strong—being honest, respectful, and genuine. This includes an ability to listen and give credence to what others are telling you. From a very practical standpoint, building trust takes time. True collaboration tends to develop when efforts focus on "small wins" that deepen trust, commitment, and shared understanding.

Recognize history.

In natural resource communities there is an existing history between citizens and agencies, as well as between different interest groups. In many places, this may mean disagreement, distrust, suspicion, or hard-line positions. This type of history tends to be around public judgments of past agency practices, poor communication among players, lack of trust, misunderstanding of the risks associated with treatment options, concerns about changes to specific sites, and traditional sides-taking. In other places, more positive relationships have evolved. This is usually attributable to the actions of individual citizens and agency personnel finding ways (many of them outlined here) to agree and work together. Whatever history you inherit, it is best to be realistic. Accept the past, learn from it, and be willing to improve on it.

Genuine communication breeds trust.

An essential value of partnerships is that they allow for serious, thoughtful communication that encourages back-and-forth discussion of issues and concerns. This give and take process is important to every participant. It is a place where personal relationships are formed, alliances are built, and trust is established. Creating opportunities for these interactive exchanges—particularly in places familiar to stakeholders—leads to more productive outcomes. For example, many long-term residents know the history of their community and its resources; thus, they can contribute ideas or be a useful sounding-board prior to projects rolling out the door to the general public. Often key leaders have well established communication channels within their community. Thus, these trustworthy partners are valued allies for reaching agreement among multiple parties.

Do they trust you?

Trust is generally considered the most important factor in reaching agreement and accomplishing management objectives on the ground. Trust is built at two levels—in personal relations with stakeholders and by the agency building credibility within the community. From a personal standpoint, it is your actions and professional competence by which most people will judge the sincerity of your efforts. Stakeholders repeatedly say that trust is more likely when resource professionals articulate their reasons for involving the public and then make good on their commitments.

Many factors contribute to trustworthy relations at the organization level. Of particular importance to citizens is having confidence in agency personnel to implement practices. Essentially, this is the ability to say what you mean and do what you say. Also important is that managers consider the values of the local community, demonstrate an ability to be flexible and listen, use planning processes that are viewed as fair and equitable, and then follow through so that efforts result in action.

It is clear that cooperation is made possible by trustworthy personal relationships at the local level.

One real difficulty for managers is the public skepticism that exists today about big institutions (big government, big business, etc.). Some people question whether federal or state agencies can provide adequate resources for on-the-ground managers to do the job required to maintain healthy forests. This places importance on local initiatives crafted by managers and citizens (e.g., Community Wildfire Protection Plans, Firewise programs, Fire Safe Councils). These are programs where good interpersonal skills and face-to-face leadership can make a difference for citizens and their communities.

It's all about the trade-offs.

A key focus of fire management at present is creating fire-adapted communities. As a result, part of the management job is to help citizens understand the risk involved—or perhaps, a better term is the trade-offs involved—in making decisions. For example, property owners will want to know about potential losses from an expected event or a proposed action. How serious is it likely to be? How soon could it occur? Similarly, they will want to know about the benefits of a management practice.

While precise answers to such questions are appreciated, they may not exist or be readily available. In these cases, being candid is important. To the extent possible, frame answers in realistic terms. But sometimes it is alright, even preferable, to say "I'm not sure" or "I don't know." Admitting uncertainty will likely lead to a greater level of deliberation, and will also go a long way toward fostering respect among parties.

Ultimately, choosing among alternatives requires clarity in management options and, where multiple objectives are present, understanding management priorities. For the public, there is a clear link between understanding the purpose and intended benefits of a practice and approval of its use. For example, increased experience with prescribed fire often leads to lower levels of concern about smoke. This view is reinforced in situations where stakeholders are able to see conditions in the field along with treatment outcomes. Although often tentative about choices, most residents in interface communities agree the least preferred option is no treatment at all.

Most citizens are willing to accept the use of management practices on a small scale; thus, land managers have an opportunity to build public confidence in their activities project-by-project while gradually reducing risks on the landscape. This conditional acceptance indicates that citizens expect agency personnel to take appropriate action to use practices safely and effectively, and will continue to support their use as long as they see managers make good on their word.

Anticipated Outcomes

- The group moves beyond past mistakes and negative interactions.
- Open communication about the trade-offs of available options builds both public understanding and civic responsibility.
- Admitting and discussing uncertainty can ultimately help people accept the consequences of decisions.
- Candid discussions help people accept the real-world constraints of funding, available resources, scientific understanding, and management limits.
- A history of positive interactions can help bridge pre- and post-fire actions.

5. Skilled Communicators: The Essential Ingredient

The strength of partnerships is their ability to build a common understanding of the consequences associated with available choices. Public understanding often can be traced to resource managers who can discuss options in ways that are meaningful to stakeholders. They recognize people need opportunities to work through the uncertainty of unfamiliar practices. Partnerships offer a flexible environment where citizens can openly communicate about local conditions and discuss specific concerns. The key concept is to treat participants like partners.

Break old habits.

While all agencies are implementing some form of public outreach, communicating for partnership building goes far beyond the usual methods and messages. The traditional NEPA process is insufficient; this alone rarely satisfies public expectations about information exchange or citizens' interest in giving input on agency plans.

Effective communication goes beyond using standardized tools to provide information. Success is a result of both the information itself and the method of delivery. Different strategies are needed to reach all segments of the community. The specific method is based on the purpose of your communication and the particular audience. It is useful to recognize that there are three basic levels of communication. Efforts will be most successful if you a select an approach aligned with your underlying objective.

1. **Awareness building** is often the initial stage in which the purpose is simply to help people recognize a problem, prepare them for subsequent messages, and encourage them to seek information. Traditional mass communication formats (i.e., newspapers, brochures, interpretive exhibits) are usually good for transmitting this information to a broad general audience.
2. **Increasing public acceptance** involves targeting information that will result in greater understanding of problems and potential solutions. This approach helps build support for specific practices and those who implement them. Useful communication strategies are typically hands-on, interpersonal forms of message delivery (i.e., demonstrations sites, field visits, neighborhood meetings) tailored to local conditions.
3. **Encouraging behaviors** is the third and most interactive level. This strategy includes working with community partners to examine local conditions, identify barriers to desired actions, encourage stakeholder projects, and build support for agency programs. For instance, in reducing fuels, the ability to dispose of vegetation is usually a bigger obstacle for most homeowners than lack of knowledge (knowing it needs to be done). Small workshops, joint projects with neighborhood associations, and establishing formal collaborative groups can be useful. At both levels two and three, including others such as extension agents or university researchers in outreach efforts can provide additional perspectives that resonate with different audiences.

Focus on the familiar.

Feedback from communities indicates that people are more likely to understand the relevance of and ultimately accept information that is specific to their local concerns. They are also more likely to be engaged in solutions if they can learn from their peers as well as technical experts. Messages are particularly salient if they target familiar places and problems. It makes sense that the best place to engage citizens is in local settings where friends and neighbors are also involved. For example, town hall-type meetings, site visits, and property owner gatherings tend to be effective mechanisms for discussing management programs and desired outcomes. These are also places where collaborative groups can play a substantive role. They can assist by hosting such events or working with local organizations to communicate through existing outreach programs.

Communicate with a purpose.

Effective communication is a result of effective planning. Beyond the three basic levels described above, there are also three distinct stages of fire that require consideration. Purposeful communication is essential in each case.

1. **Pre-fire communication:** This stage is about building understanding of existing conditions and helping stakeholders mitigate as well as defend against fire. It is important to acknowledge the challenges involved. Perhaps most important among these, is recognizing that raising community awareness does not necessarily lead to homeowner adoption of risk reduction measures or public acceptance of agency programs. One problem is that different groups have different perspectives on taking action. For example, having time for mitigation activities is often a bigger issue for part-time residents than for permanent residents. Regardless, even where adoption rates are high, risk reduction behaviors still need to be maintained over time. In a sense, the communication job is never over; thus, the role of partnerships as community networks is increasingly important.
2. **Communication during fire events:** Developing local networks prior to a wildfire can help in managing the stressful conditions that exist during an event. Residents affected by a wildfire have an ongoing need for information on the fire's status and potential impacts. Evacuations increase the communication challenge as residents are often broadly dispersed. With an established partnership, agencies can more effectively navigate this tension-filled period. For example, partners may have the ability to help spread important messages to affected friends via phone trees, text messaging, or social networking Websites. Homeowner perception of how well communications are carried out during an event can have long-lasting influences on their support for future agency management activities.
3. **Post-fire communication:** Receiving timely and targeted information after a fire can be just as important to citizens as it is during an event. In the near-term, individuals want to know the extent of damage, what is being done in the way of recovery, and what they can do to help. Particularly useful are field tours to fire sites with agency personnel to discuss the effects of an event, explore fire recovery options, and share perspectives with local property owners. Such activities lay the groundwork for longer term planning.

Ultimately, communication efforts are important during all stages of the fire cycle and decisions made in one phase often influence the options available in other phases. The process of *how* citizens and community groups are engaged is essential. More focused messages using two-way interactive communication—especially those that allow stakeholders to see things for themselves—are best for increasing understanding and building support. These strategies include engaging local leaders and organized groups for building goodwill and successful implementation. The carry-over effect is that agencies and communities have a credible communication system in place.

Anticipated Outcomes

- Communication strategies will target specific audiences with specific messages.
- Established communication networks prior to a fire event can reduce the during and after-fire tension for residents.
- Community partners accept responsibility for assisting with public outreach.
- Local problems and places provide a way to foster understanding and cooperation.
- Recognition that the communication task is a continuous, ongoing role for agencies.

6. Make a Commitment: Plan for the Long-Term

Over time, management agencies have learned to work well together on the fire-line. With a similar approach on the planning-line, efforts can be expanded to include community partners. A commitment to collaboration can provide strength and reduce conflict. Successful resource professionals treat partnership building as a process, one that cultivates understanding as well as a method for generating and implementing alternatives. Consistent leadership that sustains face-to-face communication makes a difference in the way citizens respond to management programs.

Action sustains collaboration.

Just as land management is a long-term endeavor that requires flexibility and continual investment, so too are community partnerships. Agreement comes from positive interactions, trust-building, and finding ways to work through problems together. Local groups report that these open discussions allow potential issues to be brought up early in the deliberations, rather than surfacing later and scuttling a project.

Thus, each project builds on the previous one. It is a continuous process of creating a responsive environment within an agency and also the community. A commitment to making progress helps participants see the impact of their efforts and helps hold the group together. Over time, collaborative action can become the preferred way of doing business.

Bust the barriers.

There is little doubt that real barriers exist to long-term involvement by key individuals. The agency promotional structure tends to be based on “move around to move up.” And life goes on for citizen participants as well—people have other commitments or simply get burned out with so much to do. Several ideas for maintaining continuity through transitions come from participants themselves:

- document collaborative processes
- create mentoring opportunities for a departing employee and his/her replacement
- work in teams so that a new member can step in more easily
- involve agency decision-makers, ensuring partnerships are a priority and will survive.

Pass the torch.

Ideally, partnerships will outlast agency personnel appointments and individual citizen involvement in community organizations. Often the strongest motivation for citizens to stay in a collaborative group is they feel their community has something to gain. This implies a responsibility on the part of agencies to provide continuous leadership and ensure the torch is passed to the next generation of partners.

The threat of wildfire is probably the easiest issue to build agreement around because no one wants homes or the forest to burn up. Local partnerships demonstrate the power in building relationships and trust among community members, and ultimately can lead the way to resolving natural resource conflicts beyond the fire problem. Over time, collaborative groups can influence the entire community—its ecological resources, the region's economic stability, and citizen-agency relationships. Partnerships always have room to grow—successful efforts can take on new management concerns and bring in new people. These individuals learn, interact, and enrich the pool of potential solutions. Over time, the planning process will be easier as relationships deepen and collaboration becomes the most effective way of getting things accomplished.

Anticipated Outcomes

- Increased agency awareness of changing values and concerns in communities.
- Diverse groups become comfortable with one another and see common concerns.
- Collaboration creates transparency and helps give legitimacy to agency decisions.
- Working through issues up front can avoid stumbling blocks in the 11th hour.
- The next project planning cycle is easier.

Acknowledgements

This guide and the companion DVD derive from a larger Joint Fire Science Program project on creating fire-safe communities. The project was designed to meet two primary goals: 1) summarize current knowledge from research about efforts to create fire-safe communities and 2) develop effective tech transfer methods to communicate findings that are relevant to and can be implemented by local agencies and citizen groups.

Both the DVD and this guide began to take form in Portland, Oregon during a national workshop, *Wildland Fire Summit: A Decade of Social Science Research*, that involved 18 prominent scientists who conduct research on Wildland Urban Interface issues. This group provided insights and pointed the research team to communities where real success was being achieved. Ultimately, five communities stood out and are featured in the video production along with individual agency personnel and citizens who have made significant contributions to these efforts (see back cover).

Suggestions presented in this guide have grown out of the management experience of local participants and the cumulative research of scientists working in interface communities. No single individual can claim ownership to the entirety of ideas presented here. For simplicity, and practicality, we have chosen not to use a traditional citation format for this publication. It is proper and necessary to acknowledge the excellent work and contributions of the social science research group from the Portland workshop:

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Want to learn more?

Visit **www.firescience.gov** for access to more than a decade of research and outreach materials related to management at the Wildland Urban Interface.

Where it's Working: Grand Teton National Park

Agencies surrounding Grand Teton National Park have taken a different approach to collaborative activities for forest health and fire management. Recognizing their "publics" are far ranging—year-round residents as well as many seasonal residents and short-term visitors—managers have formed an interagency partnership to provide consistent leadership and serve multiple stakeholders. Teton Interagency Fire is a partnership that includes Grand Teton National Park, Bridger-Teton National Forest, the National Elk Refuge (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service), and Jackson Hole Fire/EMS. The partnership enables the collective group to leverage the strengths of each agency involved, maximizing their overall effectiveness to serve the community and manage the region's resources. Agency members best describe the group's interests and progress:

When I first got here, we were us and they were them… and that was true with every agency. Now everybody puts their egos aside as well as their desire to make their agency the most important. We all work together for a common goal. We can accomplish so much more together than we can individually.

There are a lot of people within the federal agencies that think it's just not worth the time, and we think it is and so it's fun to prove those people wrong.

We wouldn't even think about not including our partners in a project. They may not have a role, but we don't decide that. We let them decide that.

Rather than saying "Oh we can't do that," all the different agencies involved look at things and think "hmm, how can we get that done?" If we can't figure out a way to do it, maybe the local fire department can figure out a way to do it.

It's really important for the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Elk Refuge to have this partnership because we have such a small staff. I have a background in fire information and so that's one way we can help our partners…though we may not have the fire fighting depth to be able to provide assistance when there are fires.

Visitors as a general rule don't differentiate between a National Forest, a National Park, or a state forest for that matter...and the more we can speak with one voice, wherever people are going...they are getting the same messages, hearing the same words.

It is important to start small. I think the fear would be trying to come in with some massive program for a lot of people and a lot of homes...it would be seen as just too bureaucratic.

This partnership has so many people that are willing to think creatively and to go beyond just what's easy to get the job done. And that's what it takes to be successful.

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A companion to the video program *Collaborating for Healthy Forests and Communities: Building Partnerships Among Diverse Interests.* For copies of the DVD, or for additional copies of this field guide, contact the Joint Fire Science Program or Bruce Shindler (Bruce.Shindler@oregonstate.edu) at Oregon State University.

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