

Interviews with JFSP Consortia Leadership and Staff



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Interviews with JFSP Consortia Leadership and Staff

This qualitative interview evaluation component draws on the perspectives of those most involved in consortia programming to provide a more holistic understanding of JFSP consortia processes and impacts. It is intended to complement and “fill in the gaps” of the National online survey and webmetrics evaluation components. For instance, it was hoped that qualitative interviews would illuminate the factors underlying consortia progress toward shared goals as assessed by the online survey and explain discrepancies in website feature performance. More generally, the qualitative interview component was designed to elicit information to further the development of Best Practices for consortia programming and expansion.

Qualitative interview respondents shared many success stories and struggles occurring throughout their consortium development and pertaining to a variety of programming endeavors. In examining these narratives, which were guided by a pre-developed qualitative interview script (see Appendix A), six key topics or “theme areas” emerged.

Six Key Interview Themes:

1. Consortia relationships with other organizations
2. Relationships between fire science information consumers and producers
3. Cross-consortia relationships
4. Programming and prioritization
5. Websites and social media
6. Program evaluation

This section summarizes qualitative interview findings for each of these topics, specifically focusing on reported consortia successes and challenges. It identifies potential strategies for targeting common challenges as well as other suggestions and “tips” to improve consortia programming, all of which were derived from participants’ responses (i.e., actual strategies used, responses to probes about specific suggestions/tips). In any large-scale programming endeavor, challenges will arise to which there are no easy or immediate solutions. These interviews illuminated some of the more complex challenges as well. Though results may not provide clear solutions to all challenges the consortia face, identifying these challenges and their



lacking the time and resources to continually update websites was identified as a weakness.

Qualitative Interview Results: Themes and Implications

Theme 1: Consortia Relationships with other Organizations

Across all fourteen consortia, conversation tended to center around (or at least relate to) the processes involved in building, maintaining, and strengthening relationships with the objective of promoting fire science delivery and uptake. This section primarily focuses on consortia relationships with regional organizations or entities, though relationships with national/federal organizations also apply.

The relationship building piece is the most critical to supporting consortia success. The shared goals of the consortia cannot be accomplished by the PI and Co-PI alone. A variety of players and organizations needs to be closely involved to:

1. Represent a variety of perspectives so that consortia can tap into the most prevalent regional needs and to guide consortia programming.
2. Help consortia be known and remembered by increasing awareness of the consortia and building their credibility as trusted information sources (e.g., partners can endorse the consortia in the different organizations they represent and assist in marketing within these organizations).
3. Support consortia in reaching comprehension and conviction goals by helping to produce or co-sponsor products and activities such as syntheses, webinars, and field tours.

Strengths and Success Stories

Many consortia shared success stories surrounding the relationship building piece, which often involved collaborations in the earlier phases of programming development and implementation. Examples of these successes include:

- Strategically assembling Advisory Boards or Steering Committees so they were comprised of key representatives from a variety of user groups and organizations. Diversity in Advisory Board/Steering Committee membership helped the consortia in several ways. Members helped market the consortia and increase awareness of their activities within their respective organizations, and also helped inform the consortia of specific fire science information needs within their region. Most importantly, thoughtful recruitment and selection of Advisory Board members facilitated critical organizational and group partnerships.





- Capitalizing on existing connections established by key consortium players (PI, Co-I, etc.). One consortium highlighted the benefits of having a PI who was well-known and respected in the fire science community, which helped foster perceptions of consortia credibility from the beginning developmental phases. This individual also had long-term relationships with many key players in the fire community who could serve as Advisory Board members. On the management side, some Coordinators were quite influential in various fire management groups/organizations, which helped both increase consortia awareness and credibility within the management community as well in producing outputs (e.g., web products, field tours).
- Successful outreach to numerous critical regional groups and organizations, despite the lack of solid pre-existing relationships. Several respondents emphasized the importance of reaching out to Prescribed Fire Councils in particular and described their efforts in doing so:

“These Prescribed Fire Councils involve most of the end user groups within any given state that have interest (in the respondents’ region). We have found these to be incredible valuable investments for our efforts, with a lot of payout. They have an annual meeting, and we’ve been successful so far with getting ourselves invited to those and to give a presentation introducing our consortium.”

Challenges

In some cases, it was relatively easy for consortia to establish and build relationships, most often because of pre-existing connections. In many other cases, however, relationship-building required significant time and effort on the part of the consortia, and not all of these efforts were met with immediate success. Some of the more common obstacles consortia have encountered in this area include:

- Lack of success in reaching out to some regional (and in a few cases, federal) groups and organizations. Outreach and establishing relationships has generally been more difficult for consortia with fewer pre-existing relationships and connections, though achievements in building brand-new relationships were discussed as well (see above). Some respondents reported that their outreach efforts to various organizations, including Prescribed Fire Councils, were simply ignored. Others believed that certain regional organizations perceived their consortium as somewhat threatening:

Strategies and Future Directions

- Making efforts to improve communication may be critical to building and maintaining relationships, as well as to encouraging participation from Advisory Board/Steering Committee members. As one respondent noted:



“And there’s a couple of other organizations that within the first year and a half, we made contact with and we exchanged information and made plans to talk and help each other out. And then, you know, things get busy, and it’s like a year later! We’ve made a lot of contacts...it’s just a matter of time to share and figure out how we can best help each other.”

Some consortia reported relatively frequent Advisory Board/Steering Committee meetings, whereas others said they had not had a meeting since the initial planning phases. It may not always be possible to hold regular in-person meetings, but consortia could be proactive in scheduling conference calls and electronic meetings, or encouraging increased electronic communications with Board/Committee members (e.g., establishing a Google Group).

- Establishing formal communication plans and descriptions of Advisory Board/Steering Committee members’ roles and responsibilities, as some consortia do, may help to increase engagement. For example, a few representatives described delegating certain responsibilities/products to Board/Committee members during their meetings. It is more likely that Board/Committee members will fully participate if they have assumed that role with full knowledge of its expectations. Written (even if via email) or verbal agreement to assist with particular programming endeavors promotes accountability.

Overall, the development of Advisory Board/Committee Member job descriptions could be beneficial in communicating clear responsibilities, roles, and duties. A sample Board Member job description that can be adapted for potential and continuing JFSP consortia Advisory Board members can be found at: <http://www.nonprofitworks.com/downloads/default.asp>

Formally conveying role responsibilities is an accepted best practice for non-profit and NGO Advisory Board membership.

- Tips and strategies are needed to help support relationship-building efforts for consortia with fewer pre-existing relationships and connections

to regional groups and organizations. Similarly, some consortia also may benefit from suggestions regarding finding webinar speakers and willing co-sponsors of active learning events that foster commitment and conviction.

Theme 2: Relationships between Fire Science Information Producers and Consumers

Fostering trust, communication, and collaboration among fire science information producers and consumers is a key objective of programming across all consortia. The overarching goal of enhancing fire science delivery depends upon fire scientists' understanding and receptiveness to managers' needs, as well as managers' willingness to trust scientists' products and apply the most current information and tools in the field. Relations between consumers and producers remain complex in many regions, and changing perceptions and attitudes takes time. Yet, many respondents reported significant achievements in promoting positive interactions between these two groups.

Strengths and Success Stories

- Overall, respondents emphasized the importance of face-to-face interactions in helping to build relationships between consumers and producers. Respondents also understood the need to “speak managers’ language.”

“At our workshop, we asked participants, ‘Would you call a researcher/scientist?’ A young woman who was an assistant FMO said, ‘I would never call a researcher. I would be afraid to.’ And then somebody asked, ‘Well, would you call (the Consortium PI)?’ And she said, ‘Well, now I would that I’ve met him face-to-face. I’m not scared of him anymore.”

- Several consortia have found creative ways to increase interactions between consumers and producers, which have yielded positive results. For instance, one consortium held a workshop during which attendees were encouraged to visit and talk with fire science experts at tables set up that targeted a particular topic. Another consortium schedules regular potluck-style meetings at the home of an Advisory Team member so that managers and scientists can interact in a more casual environment. One respondent also described a consortium-sponsored internship program intended to bring managers and scientists together:



“There are many fire scientists who are great at interacting with managers, but there’s also potentially a difference in perspective between the scientists and managers. In our needs assessment, (we focused) on what the managers had to say, and coming back to the scientists and saying, ‘I know you said you already did this, but the managers are still saying they need it.’ So there’s a disconnect.”

Several consortia reported difficulties in engaging the academic fire scientist/research community. Respondents attributed this to the lack of direct incentives that participation in consortia can provide for academics. For example, there is no guarantee of research funds or publications in exchange for their efforts.

Strategies and Future Directions

- Continue to brainstorm and share creative means of increasing interactions between consumers and producers. Face-to-face interactions encouraging open and honest communication as well as strategies designed to foster collaborations among consumers and producers on projects (such as the internship program described above) could have substantial impacts on consortia growth.
- Coordinators with connections to the management community and partners with a management background may have valuable insights regarding ways to reduce tensions and enhance communication among consumers and producers. Their input can help target and prevent misunderstandings and ensure that consortia products (including websites and active learning events) are well-received.
- Needs assessments should be conducted regularly to help minimize the continuing “disconnect” between producers’ understanding of consumers’ needs and consumers’ actual needs. Using more than one approach in assessing consumers’ needs will likely yield the most helpful findings. For instance, drawing on both survey data and testimonials from consumers in the region (obtained either formally or informally) can provide a more comprehensive understanding than either method in

“There are a couple of issues out there that seem to be a high priority. But when you ask the question, ‘What are the fire-related management issues that you most need research on?’...those things that seem to be really hot topics come out in a really low percentage!”



productive strategies for furthering both individual and aggregate consortia goal progress.

Strengths and Success Stories

- All interview participants recognized the importance of learning from and collaborating with other consortia. The six recently funded consortia in particular seemed to benefit from the shared experiences of the eight original JFSP consortia. Overall, respondents appreciated the supportive nature of cross-consortia interactions:

“One of the things I like about this project is that the consortia are not competitors. So, most of our interactions with other consortia have been supportive and helpful. It’s sort of like we have a network of people who are helping each other. Which, for somebody coming from an academic environment...scrambling over crusts of bread...it’s kind of refreshing!”

- Similarly, all representatives said they had shared information with other consortia, and most had collaborated with one or more of the other consortia on some level. Some consortia said that most of their interactions with other consortia personnel had been limited to JFSP annual meetings, but others described actively seeking advice from other consortia:

“The Co-PI and I frequently contact other consortia saying, ‘Hey, what about this?’ or, ‘How do you do this?’ and they contact us as well. That’s part of my draw in wanting to be a leader of a consortium, because this is a network of people really trying to do this better, and I get a lot of energy from that.”

- Others reported co-sponsoring workshops and other events with neighboring consortia, and described various ways in which the consortia help each other out:

“Last week, they were heading to the (neighboring state) Prescribed Fire Council, and I couldn’t attend. So I sent a series of slides on our consortium, and they included them in their presentation.”



Challenges

Respondents cited lack of time and opportunities for face-to-face communication with other consortia personnel as overarching obstacles to building and strengthening cross-consortia relationships. These obstacles have been exacerbated by sequestration and the resulting travel constraints. No other specific barriers were reported. Many respondents did, however, express a desire to increase communication and collaboration with other consortia.



Strategies and Future Directions

- The annual JFSP Consortia Meeting is critical in promoting cross consortia sharing and learning. Many respondents expressed appreciation for the opportunity to attend this year's meeting despite funding and travel limitations, and hoped that these in-person meetings would continue in the future.

“The national meeting has been absolutely critical, and I can't imagine us evolving as a consortium the way we have...it would have been a hundred times harder if I hadn't had a chance to go to the national meeting, even before we were funded.”

- Respondents indicated that face-to-face meetings were most helpful, but are not always feasible. Just as with other partner relationships, proactive communication is needed to make cross-consortia relationships as productive as possible. All consortia should be encouraged to reach out to other JFSP consortia via telephone, email, conference calls, etc. with any requests for tips or information and to share perspectives and experiences. The recently established Google Group has been a useful forum for consortia seeking feedback and for information sharing.
- All JFSP consortia are striving to enhance fire science delivery while retaining their uniqueness and meeting the most critical fire science information needs in their region. Cross-consortia collaboration should not undermine these goals. Rather, consortia can still retain their individual brand and identity while co-sponsoring products/events with other consortia if the content of these outputs benefits end users in each region involved. Neighboring consortia co-sponsoring workshops and other active learning events is a popular example, but there also are opportunities for collaboration among more geographically distal consortia. For example, some consortia separated by hundreds or even thousands of miles cover patches of similar forests and ecosystems. To the extent that the need is present, these consortia could collaborate on written products (e.g.,

syntheses, research briefs, etc.) relevant to their similar conditions. As specified by the JFSP Board, the consortia also should communicate and collaborate to ensure that webinars are advertised and accessible to all potentially interested members of the fire community despite their specific consortium *affiliation*. In addition, communication and collaboration regarding webinars and other distance learning opportunities can help minimize duplication and conserve consortia time and resources.

Theme 4: Programming and Prioritization

Most consortia reported discrepancies between the outreach and educational activities they had proposed and the activities they have actually been able to implement to date. Without exception, this discrepancy was attributed to capacity issues- i.e., lack of resources, time, travel funds, etc. Though all respondents expressed great satisfaction with their involvement in their consortium thus far, many also admitted that the workload was more than they had anticipated. Thus, consortia have had to prioritize their outputs- i.e., determining which merited the most immediate attention and resources. This section highlights the most notable consortia successes and struggles in doing so.

Strengths and Success Stories

- Most consortia reported prioritizing website development and interactive learning activities that promoted both comprehension and conviction. These interactive learning events were among the most frequently cited “biggest successes” among consortia- not only in terms of reaching end-users, but in establishing partnerships and credibility as well. One consortium organized a regional conference just as they were getting established:

“Initially the challenge was just getting people involved. Because it was a new conference that had never happened before, and we were a new organization, and a lot of them didn’t know who we were. But once we got over that hurdle and got a lot of partners on board, it turned out to be this great partner-building experience.”



- In accordance with the most recent JFSP Board recommendations, some consortia described distributing synthesized research materials (e.g., briefs, field guides) to provide context for particular on-the-ground learning activities. Similarly, others related that they had scheduled consortium-sponsored field tours or other learning activities to coincide with larger meetings or other events in their region to help increase manager participation and ease travel and funding burdens.
- Some consortia discussed the importance of recognizing and seizing “teachable moments.” For instance, more than one Western consortium conducted a field tour or site visit in the aftermath of a recent high-profile wildfire. Negative effects of prescribed fires in Midwest regions also were cited as unfortunate incidents that increased awareness of regional consortia objectives and could be used as teachable moments.



Challenges

- Respondents were eager to use teachable moments to promote fire science delivery. More generally, they recognized the need for some flexibility in consortia programming to address dynamic issues in the fire community. This proved to be easier said than done for several consortia, given capacity constraints and the extent to which programming was already planned or in place. Concerns about how to incorporate flexibility needs into funding proposals were especially noteworthy:

“A challenge with respect to this ‘need to be nimble’ is how to properly budget in a way that you will be able to do that- in a way that your funding agency will get what you’re asking. It would probably be a good conversation for us to have as all of the consortia together with Joint Fire Science about... there’s some ‘nimbleness’ aspect here that’s really difficult to predict and to budget for 1-3 years in the future when we don’t know what’s going to happen.”

- Many consortia representatives reported difficulty in planning and executing events such as field tours and road shows that would provide opportunities for commitment. Reported barriers to implementing such events included lack of partner involvement/participation in helping to sponsor these activities, as well as capacity issues such as lack of time and travel restrictions. Some cited low numbers of participants who were willing and able to travel to attend such events.

“Getting people to actually contribute...we do have partners that contribute resources. But to contribute enough time to pull off a workshop or something like that...we’re still trying to figure that piece out.”

“We’ve done a couple of (field tours and demonstration sites), but they’re often low in attendance. Which is good, but also you’re not reaching a large group.”

- Several of the consortia were funded in regions where there were already many established fire science delivery networks and organizations. Some were able to use this to their advantage in forming partnerships to help them further their goals, whereas others struggled a bit more—particularly with the “value-added” component. That is, what could these new consortia add to the already well-developed fire science community in their region, and how could they best market themselves to regional organizations and end users?

Strategies and Future Directions

- All consortia products are important pieces of improving fire science delivery. Yet, consortia need credibility, word-of-mouth endorsements, and partner support so that end users will access, trust, and apply the information provided. Thus, when faced with a variety of programming tasks and capacity constraints, focusing on those products with opportunities for commitment and conviction will likely be most conducive to consortia goal progress.
- Consortia should not be discouraged by low attendance at active, on-the-ground learning opportunities such as field tours and demonstration sites, and should continue to sponsor such events to the extent possible. Even if only a few end users are reached as a result of a field workshop, for example, the potential returns from serving and interacting with these few participants may be much greater than the returns of more distal activities intended to increase awareness. As many consortia representatives said, there is no substitute for face-to-face interactions and on-the-ground learning in promoting fire science delivery and establishing consortia credibility.



A few others reported that they were initially wary of social media but became more enthusiastic with continued use:

“If we had this call (interview) a month ago, I would have said, ‘Oh, Twitter, no. I am not doing it.’ I want to talk to people. Now I love Twitter. I think it’s perfect for our consortium. I can glean what I really think is specific to our region and put it out there.”



Challenges

- Capacity constraints were highlighted throughout the interviews as obstacles to a variety of programming endeavors, but this was particularly notable when discussing consortia websites. All respondents cited lack of time, personnel, and/or other resources as barriers to creating, maintaining, and improving their sites. The level of concern over capacity issues varied across consortia and often depended on whether they had outside support (e.g., someone other than the PI or Coordinator) to assume a substantial amount of responsibility for their site.
- The consortia were highly satisfied with the performance of many of their website features- particularly with the popularity of newsletters, blogs, and archived webinars. Other features, however, have not been as popular as

“If our website is going to get much better than it is now, then I would really need input or help from somebody.”

“I’m not sure how we’re going to collaborate and make sure the website stays maintained, and can handle all of the products and webinars that are coming up.”

expected. Some consortia expressed disappointment at the relatively low visitor use of literature libraries or searchable databases, which required substantial time and effort to develop. All representatives, with one notable exception, reported very infrequent use of their interactive features (e.g., “Ask an Expert,” discussion forums).

- As described above, some respondents had favorable attitudes of using social media to promote the consortium and fire science awareness. Others, however, did not believe social media (Twitter) in particular would be useful for their consortium:

“To be honest, I think JFSP is making way too big a deal out of Twitter. There’s very few people in our region that are on Twitter and following us.”

“We might be behind the times in our region, because I don’t know anyone in my personal or professional world who is using Twitter. As soon as it starts to become a service that our partners would use, we would further explore that.”

Others expressed concern about the time involved in updating and maintaining social media, and believed that this time would be better spent on face-to-face communication efforts:

“You almost need somebody working full-time, or at least .25 or .5 FTE doing social media to do it right. It’s much more important to have somebody like our Coordinator who is going to get on the ground and talk to people, and have that credibility, versus at the expense of somebody sitting 500 miles away in an office who is just going to be tweeting stuff all the time.”

Strategies and Future Directions

Despite capacity constraints and other challenges, many respondents were excited about plans to improve their website and working hard to implement these plans. Respondents also shared several Best Practices and suggestions to maximize the impact of consortia sites and, to a lesser extent, social media.

- **Get help.** The vast majority of respondents indicated that they (or another responsible person) were overwhelmed by work and expectations related to the consortium website. Many said that they wished they had budgeted for more assistance, or just wished they had more help in general. Considering the rapid advancement of technology and the forthcoming Digital Government Strategy mandates, it is likely that consortium IT responsibilities will only increase. Specific needs ranged from help with site organization and design, to maintenance and keeping the site continually updated and “fresh,” to expanding and improving the site, or, most commonly, a combination of several website-related tasks.



Finding assistance is easier said than done, but it is clear that many consortia will need to do so in the near future.

- Effective websites and social media accounts need to be continually updated. Some respondents recommended updating websites at least once per week. Others noted the importance of tweeting frequently to catch the attention of users who may not “log in” daily.
- Make sure that the information most relevant to your target audience is highly visible and accessible from your home page. As one Coordinator in charge of their consortium’s site said,



“I’ll be honest. If you can’t find things in about two or three seconds, you can’t navigate to a page that’s obvious, people are gone.”

- Creative marketing endeavors for consortia websites, as mentioned earlier, have proven to be successful and should be shared and adopted when appropriate. In addition, consortia can make efforts to draw people to their sites through other electronic routes.

“You know, one of our strategies is to kind of force people to our website. So, we may send out an email about our newsletter, but our newsletter isn’t in that email. It’s a link to our website. So it kind of forces them to explore our website a little bit- at least to BE there.”

Others talked about cross-posting links with partner sites (i.e., partner’s sites include links

to consortia sites; consortia sites include links to partner sites) and even sharing certain corners of their site with partner organizations.

- Keep things simple and choose a platform that will allow multiple users to regularly change and update the site. A user-friendly platform minimizes delays in posting the most current updates and information, and helps ensure the livelihood of the site in the absence of the key individual responsible for the site. Squarespace seems to be relatively user-friendly and preferred by many of the consortia, whereas FRAMES had more limitations, but benefits and drawbacks to several types of platforms were discussed.
- Consistent with JFSP Board goals targeting increased awareness, it is recommended that all JFSP consortia establish and regularly use social

media accounts such as Twitter to disseminate information. As most consortia are new at using social media, respondents had fewer suggestions regarding how to successfully promote their consortium and fire science delivery via social media than through other means. As noted above, frequent updates are were recommended. Though some respondents expressed concerns about the time required to maintain effective social media accounts, others actually highlighted the ease of using Twitter:

“What I like about Twitter is that you can sort of tweet about what you’re doing anyways. It’s very simple, takes little time.”

“Twitter is super easy, quick...I just leave it open on a tab on my internet and check it a couple of times a day, and if I think I should tweet, I’ll tweet. It’s hard for us to say what we really get out of it, but since the input is so low...”

Cross-consortia sharing of tips and information may be particularly beneficial in targeting and overcoming various IT issues. This could involve tips on budgeting, website organization/design, obtaining assistance, and how to maximize the impacts of social media accounts given limited time and resources.

Theme 6: Program Evaluation

The national JFSP consortia evaluation aims to track progress towards shared consortia goals at the aggregate level. In addition to participating in the national evaluation, each consortium also is responsible for documenting and reporting their processes and outcomes at the individual, regional level. In current economic conditions, funding agencies and stakeholders are increasingly focused on program evaluation and requesting specific evidence of programming outputs and impacts. Yet, program evaluation was an unfamiliar topic to many of the interview respondents, and even more unfamiliar to their targeted populations of fire scientists and managers. Many respondents had taken steps to build their evaluation capacity and had implemented some post-event



"We usually meet after an event and discuss the successes and failures of the event. When we meet with the Governing Board, we also discuss the events with them. Most of them have either heard about how the event went or were there themselves, and so we get feedback from the Governing Board."

Challenges

- Some respondents expressed continued frustration and confusion surrounding program evaluation- both in terms of individual consortium evaluations, and regarding the national JFSP consortium evaluation efforts. These individuals typically recognized the necessity of program evaluation, but believed they lacked the expertise to contribute to consortium-specific evaluations. These sentiments were most common among consortia with no connections to extension or social science professionals:

"We've done no formal (regional-level) evaluation, such as a survey. Mainly because we don't have the expertise to do that."

"I was completely sideswiped by the importance of, or I didn't even consider how we needed to deal with evaluations of ourselves. We don't have any social scientists involved as Co-PIs."

Regarding participation in the national e-survey:

"My biggest problem is that I don't understand what I'm doing when I participate in that. I know I have the opportunity to add local questions, but I need some help with that. And our consortium...our people, our goals... are different enough from everybody else's that I don't feel like we quite fit into the national evaluation."



- Program evaluation is not only a relatively unfamiliar area to many consortium PIs and Coordinators, but to partners and programming participants as well. Some respondents discussed partners' hesitation in administering evaluations and managers' hesitation in participating in them:



“Our principal leads are fire scientists. And I remember the first few meetings, where it actually became clear that they had to do this evaluation part. I came and talked for like 20 minutes, and one of the scientists just looked right at our PI and said, ‘Are you kidding? Do we really have to do this?’ This is not something that any of them are used to.”

“The culture of the fire community and some of the research community too...they’re just not survey takers. It’s really difficult. They’re just not really that into it.”

- Two representatives from different consortia reported very high response rates (i.e., between 50-80%) to their post-event surveys and questionnaires. More often, however, respondents expressed concern over low response rates and wondered how they could improve this. In addition, they suspected that the responses obtained were biased- either only people with highly positive or negative experiences chose to complete evaluation forms.

“We send out evaluations after workshops and field tours, although we get less feedback from those. Only like 5-9 people out of 45 will fill those out. It would be nice to figure out how to get people to fill out evaluations with a greater frequency. I guess the challenge is figuring out...you know, you don’t want to inundate people with evaluations. How often to ask people?”

- Many respondents expressed concerns over survey fatigue, as illustrated by the above quote. Some of these concerns pertained to individual consortium evaluation activities, but they were more often cited when discussing the national evaluation e-survey component. In particular, respondents worried that fire community members would receive duplicate survey invitations or become annoyed with the Dillman (2010) three-step process, which specifies that three separate email invitations

should be sent to potential participants. In addition, some respondents anticipated low response rates to the 2013 national e-survey given other surveys their constituents were recently asked to complete, and thus chose to “opt-out” of this year’s e-survey if JFSP Board requirements allowed them to do so.

- Some respondents reported difficulties in assessing their website’s performance using quantitative analytics:

“I don’t think any of us really know what’s good or bad. I think a single visit to our site on average is like 2.87 pages (deep). I mean, is that good? I don’t know.”

“I’m not really sure what it all actually means. Part of that is that I haven’t taken the time to go through this analytics package to figure out what it all means.”

- When directly asked, all respondents expressed uncertainties about measuring and documenting more long-term programming outcomes (e.g., changes in environmental, social, and political conditions). Understandably, the most recently funded consortia were just beginning to explore the basics of program evaluation and assessment of short- and medium-term outcomes, and had not yet considered means of assessing long-term outcomes. Many representatives from the original eight consortia said that they had thought about the need to assess long-term impact of consortia programming down the road, but were unsure how to do so.

Strategies and Future Directions

- ***Continue efforts to build evaluation knowledge and capacity.*** Understanding program evaluation can be challenging for many individuals in the fire and research community, and doing so will require time and effort. Yet, the current emphasis on program evaluation and demonstrating processes and impacts is likely to further increase in this climate of limited resources. Thus, it is strongly recommended that consortia personnel become familiar with the basics of program evaluation and subsequently expand their knowledge and skill sets in this area. The Evaluation Resource Guide for JFSP Consortia provides an overview of key evaluation concepts, methods, and tools, as well as many additional resource references to help consortia build evaluation capacity. The national evaluation team is currently developing resources to assist consortia in qualitative evaluation (e.g., interviews, focus groups) endeavors. In addition, the national team is available to review Logic Models or to help with any specific evaluation questions or needs.





- The evaluation team has revised the quantitative webmetrics data collection template (part of the national evaluation) to help minimize the reporting burden. Chet Buell (SFE Webmaster) has conducted webinars designed to help consortia obtain the requested analytics and complete this template, which have been archived and are available for consortia to review. The evaluation team will continue to modify the webmetrics data collection template based on consortia feedback if needed. Further webmetrics webinars on various topics also may be offered depending on consortia interest.

Numerous brief online tutorials (both text and video) are available to help further consortia understanding of quantitative analytics pertaining to their individual websites. When interpreting their web analytics, consortia should focus more on trends and progress rather than actual numbers. For instance, a monthly total of 20 unique visits may be either an indicator of success or one of concern, depending upon numerous factors (e.g., a consortium’s developmental phase, size of target audience, unique visitor counts in prior months, potential for audience saturation, time of year, etc.). Seasonal trends in particular can affect quantitative webmetrics, such that site use tends to decrease during the winter holidays and during the summer. “Page depth” metrics indicate the extent to which a particular user explores various aspects of the site, but also may be low if a user quickly found the information they were seeking within the site. Ultimately, it is recommended that consortia consider context when interpreting their quantitative analytics to better understand user behavior and site impacts.

- There are a few measures consortia can take to help increase evaluation survey response rates. First, participants may be more likely to complete and return the survey if the purpose of the survey is clearly explained, preferably in-person by a key consortium contact. This works best for evaluations of individual consortium activities, but also can help increase responses to the national e-survey as well:

“If I see someone, I say, ‘Did you get that survey?’ and they say, ‘Yeah.’ And I say, ‘Did you fill it out?’ and they’re like ‘No...’ and I say, ‘Well, please do it, and this is why...’ Usually, that actually gets someone to fill it out.”

One consortium representative reported high response rates to an e-survey sent out after an event. Response rates are generally highest, however, when participants are asked to complete an evaluation questionnaire or survey during an event, though they may be given the option to complete the survey at home via internet or return the survey in the mail. If possible,

allow participants time to complete the survey during your scheduled event. For instance, evaluation surveys can be distributed during the wrap-up of a workshop or conference session, or an extra 15 minutes could be allotted at the end of an event to give people time to complete surveys.

Incentives are popular means of increasing survey response rates. It is understood that the consortia budgets are limited and may not allow for survey incentives. When possible, however, small incentives can significantly increase evaluation survey/questionnaire response rates. For example, consortia may choose to hold a raffle for low-cost prizes (e.g., "SWAG" type items, \$10 Starbucks Gift Cards) for events in which they deem participant feedback especially important. This can be done while keeping actual survey responses confidential- for example, giving individuals who turn in an evaluation form a raffle ticket stub with corresponding numbers that will be drawn for a prize.

The national e-survey currently adheres to the Dillman (2010) method, which recommends that three separate participation requests be distributed to potential respondents to a mail or online survey: An initial participation request, a follow-up reminder, and a final reminder. Though the Dillman method can be time consuming and may irritate a few participants, we recommend continued use of this protocol based on data pertaining to distribution of recruitment emails and subsequent participation that was collected during the 2011 and 2012 e-survey waves. These data revealed that distribution of the third (final) survey reminder resulted in the participation of more than one-quarter (28%) of the total sample. Consortia also may wish to consider using the three-phase Dillman method when distributing mail or electronic evaluation surveys pertaining to regional activities.

- Direct communication about the purpose of an evaluation and how an individual's responses will be helpful also can help combat survey fatigue. It is important to note that surveys are not the only means of evaluating consortia processes and impacts. Qualitative methods such as focus groups or interviews can provide a more in-depth understanding of partners' and/or end users' perspectives and experiences. Some respondents expressed concerns over the additional time and resources needed to conduct qualitative evaluation research. Qualitative research endeavors do indeed require additional time on the part of both the researchers and participants. Yet, qualitative evaluations are highly valuable in supplementing and interpreting quantitative evaluation findings, and may yield other benefits for consortia. Specifically, conducting focus groups or qualitative interviews with partners and/or end users will help ensure these participants that their opinions are highly valued, further consortia credibility as a knowledge broker catering to user



opinions and experiences, those who participated in these interviews provided highly valuable information that can help further collective progress towards JFSP consortia goals.

The findings from this qualitative interview component of the national JFSP consortia evaluation extend and complement the results from the quantitative components obtained thus far in several ways. For instance, initial findings from the national e-survey and quantitative webmetrics component suggest that the consortia have been successful in increasing end users' awareness and comprehension of fire science information and tools. The qualitative interview participants helped identify likely factors contributing to these successes (e.g., effective means of marketing their website and disseminating fire science information). Conversely, respondents also provided explanations for slower progress than expected (in some regions) in certain endeavors such as implementing planned programming on a specific schedule and in regional program evaluation. In addition, the interviews helped illuminate some barriers to attaining collective JFSP consortia goals that would not be readily identified via quantitative assessments.

Respondents provided valuable strategies and tips that can be adapted to help ensure continued JFSP consortia success. All of the strategies and future directions reported here were derived from these interviews or from other direct communications with consortia representatives. Some issues, however, remained unresolved, and the interviews did not reveal many specific strategies or action plans for targeting these issues. Such issues include consortia challenges with demonstrating their "value-added component" in regions with existing fire science information "brokers," getting partners to help contribute to or co-sponsor active learning opportunities, and overarching capacity issues. Though interview results may not offer easy solutions, they do help highlight these issues and the need to develop creative approaches to address them.

Perhaps the most critical lesson learned from the qualitative interviews was that cross-consortia communication and collaboration is critical to attaining the shared goal of enhancing fire science delivery; of increasing the accessibility of fire science information and tools and the extent to which they are applied in field contexts. All of the fourteen JFSP consortia are unique entities with differing political, cultural, and ecological environments. Yet, as the interview findings illustrate, many of the consortia face similar challenges, and shared strategies

for success may be modified and adapted across consortia to help further goal progress within their own unique contexts. The JFSP consortia should be encouraged to retain their unique branding and cater to the specific needs of their regional end users. Increased cross-consortia communication and collaboration, however, may be the most productive means of overcoming capacity obstacles and furthering collective goal progress.



Appendix A

GUIDE FOR QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

Note: This is only a general guide we will be using to conduct the qualitative interviews. Specific questions may differ according to a consortium's developmental stage, prior question responses (e.g., we may want to explore a particular response further) and time constraints.



Overview of consortia goals/needs and program development

*****QUESTION 1: What are your consortium's primary goals?**

- In what ways do you think these goals relate to the goals of other consortia and the overarching objective of promoting fire science information accessibility and applicability?

*****QUESTION 2: Please tell us more about the features that make your consortium unique (e.g., demographic, ecological, political features, etc.)**

*****QUESTION 3: Tell us a bit more about how your consortium developed programming (e.g., outreach/educational activities) to target your specific needs and goals.**

- What challenges did you face during this developmental process?
- Is there anything you would have done differently in the planning/developmental phases?
- Do you have any recommendations for consortia in the earlier developmental stages?

Experiences with outreach/educational activities

*****QUESTION 4: What types of interactive learning activities were proposed to help further progress toward your consortium's goals (e.g., conferences, workshops, field demos, webinars, etc.?)**

- What challenges did you face in implementing these activities (e.g., any difficulties in coordination, recruitment, advertising)? Do you have any suggestions about how to facilitate the implementation process?
- Are there any disparities between the programming you would like to implement and execute and the programming that you have actually been able to conduct?

*****QUESTION 5: To what extent have you been able to reach participants in your target audiences through interactive outreach/educational activities?**

*****QUESTION 6: Which features of your interactive learning opportunities that you've offered thus far do you think have been most useful in facilitating progress toward your goals (could be aspects of program content, type of activity, accessibility of activity, relevance, etc.)?**

Fire science information syntheses

*****QUESTION 7: What outputs, other than website development, did your consortium propose to help increase end users' access to synthesized fire science information? (e.g., fact sheets, brochures, newsletters, research summaries, etc.)**

- What challenges, if any, have you encountered in producing and distributing these syntheses?
- Do you have any tips on how to increase exposure and application of such information?

Individual consortium websites/web-based social networking

*****QUESTION 8: Where is your consortium at in terms of website development? For instance, are you in the planning phases, have you recently established your site, or are you working to expand your existing site?**

- What challenges did your consortium face in planning, developing, and/or establishing your website? For example, were there any issues related to personnel/resources, or in generally moving toward establishing an independent website?
- Do you have any suggestions for ways to help facilitate the website planning, establishment, or expansion processes?

*****QUESTION 9: Our current webmetrics data indicate that all participating consortia are successfully recruiting and retaining users. Do you have any ideas or comments about what promoted this success in your consortium?**

*****QUESTION 10: What features of your site do you think are most critical to facilitating progress toward your consortium's goals?**

- What seems to be working, or not working as expected (e.g., "ask an expert" feature)?



*****QUESTION 17: Please describe any challenges you've faced in participating in/implementing the components of the national evaluation (e.g., recruiting e-survey participants, providing webmetrics data, etc.).**

- Do you have any suggestions about how to minimize these difficulties at the local or national levels?

General perspectives

*****QUESTION 18: Overall, what would you say have been your biggest successes?**

*****QUESTION 19: Based on your experiences and what you have learned thus far, what would you have done differently if you could "start over" in planning, developing, and implementing your consortium's programming?**

*****QUESTION 20: What ideas do you have for consortia to be even more successful over the next few years?**

