

# COMMUNITY WILDFIRE PROTECTION PLANS

## Enhancing Collaboration & Building Community Capacity

### Quick-Guide #1: Current Community Situation

**Understanding the capacities and social dynamics of a community is useful in undertaking a community-based collaborative project. Particularly important are the history of the community and its social composition, including the individual and organizational resources which give it the capacity to launch a collaborative effort.**

Just as ecosystems vary, communities vary in their histories, social diversity and organizational complexity. Their economic function, growth trends, land ownership patterns, and array of resources influence the capacity of a community to launch a collective project. Social scientists categorize community assets as different kinds of “capital.” Social capital (civic participation, norms and trust) and human capital (individual skills and training) are particularly important to the success of CWPP planning, along with political capital (government support) and natural capital (broadly defined as including attachment to place and stewardship ethic).

**Social capital is related to community history—prior events and processes that help shape a community’s identity and expectations for civic engagement.** The issues and concerns that may arise during participant identification, or plan framing, and other CWPP activities have roots in past resource and wildland fire management. Previous wildfire planning or fuel reduction projects can lay the groundwork for the development and implementation of the CWPP. Even if the objective of an earlier project is not an exact match to CWPP goals and objectives, decisions related to issue framing, definitions of terms, and analysis areas (as just three examples) can be adapted for the CWPP process.

Disagreements within the community regarding any number of issues may threaten the collaborative planning process. Being aware of earlier conflicts may help address differing interests and keep the CWPP process moving forward. Resources (individuals, networks, relationships, and funding) that supported previous fire planning will be key to the CWPP process and implementation.

**Individuals bring their talents, knowledge, and skills (human capital) to collaborative wildland fire management.** Although agency staff members are likely contributors to the CWPP process, residents can often fill the role of problem solver, data collector, grant writer, fundraiser, and meeting facilitator. People involved in past community efforts can form a cadre of CWPP team members who are experienced in collaborative planning and can offer examples of its benefits to new team members. Retired fire and planning professionals, foresters and agency managers bring many skills and experience; retired agency people are sensitive to local issues and knowledgeable about forest and fire management. (OVER)





One of the more critical roles that individuals play in collaborative wildland fire management is that of a **catalyst for change**. Key community and agency leaders can spark a collaborative effort, taking steps to secure funding and shepherding the process. Besides individuals, events or actions occurring at the community level can also be catalysts. National Fire Plan and other grant funding has been a catalyst, as has state and federal legislation. Wildland fires themselves serve as catalysts. Even when the fire event is removed by time and space, good educators and communicators can make use of these windows of opportunity to facilitate change.

**Organizations and networks mobilize community assets such as financial and political capital, and structure human and social capital.** Key participants, such as fire department members, county planners and community leaders, have access to these organizations and networks, as do some intermediaries or consultants. These people may also provide linkages to county government or other departments where funding or expertise may be found. Collaborative stewardship groups or watershed councils, and neighborhood or homeowners' associations can help implement the CWPPs. Communities with members who have ties to organizations both within and outside the community may have greater capacity to tackle community-wide concerns. Firewise Communities and Fire Safe Councils networks create ties among communities.

**Communities can capitalize on residents' attachment to place (natural capital) to encourage wildfire planning and mitigation.** Consistent information about local forest ecology and wildfire behavior, risk assessments, and mitigation opportunities — created before or during the planning process — provides a common language for sharing information with agencies and community members. This can build on the connections to place—as a source of livelihood or retirement retreat — and create shared responsibility and support for CWPP implementation.

**Informal systems, neighborhood networks and ongoing social events can bring a community together to accomplish goals,** and are especially important in small, isolated communities which may have strong attachment to place and sense of mutual obligation, but lack assets such as financial and political capital. These communities benefit from intermediaries, such as volunteer or paid fire department or government agency staff leadership steering the CWPP process. Although small communities may require assistance, it is important to identify and incorporate their local leaders, strengths and values. CWPPs can include even small-scale or seasonal activities such as cleanup days that immediately engage community residents and build the sense of community, in order to generate interest and visibility.

Don't count on economic and political capital to be sufficient to launch and sustain a CWPP process. Communities lacking an ability to work together (social capital) and not taking the time to build it will find their CWPP may lack community or agency support. While funders may be tempted to invest in high capacity communities as models or pilot projects, it is important to recognize that others can mobilize needed assets from within or without and be successful. Policy might suggest and support networks and organizations which can build capacity, especially in small, remote communities.

