

COMMUNITY WILDFIRE PROTECTION PLANS

Enhancing Collaboration & Building Community Capacity

Quick-Guide #14: New and Increased Capacities

The process of developing a community wildfire protection plan builds and improves the social capacity of a neighborhood, community or county to work together and get things done. Both the Western Governors Association (WGA) and the National Fire Plan (NFP) recognized the importance of building capacity for a comprehensive approach to creating more fire resilient forests and communities. The enduring outcomes of CWPPs will be not the plans themselves, but the capacity for change they build, the strategic opportunities they promote, the knowledge they create, and the connections among people and organizations they forge.

One CWPP participant stated it this way:

Really it turned out they needed to deal with or organizational capacity, much more than wild fire. Having stronger organizational capacity was ultimately going to help them address wildfire and every other vulnerability that community has.



Different communities start the CWPP process with different capacities

Prior to the Healthy Forest Restoration Act, communities with fewer economic or local government resources had more difficulty competing for National Fire Plan funding. The CWPP process has reached more of these communities, partly by working at the county scale, and has provided these communities access to resources (money, information, intermediaries) that allow them to develop a local CWPP that facilitates implementation of priority community or neighborhood projects. Communities with fewer assets mobilized internal strengths, especially their sense of mutual obligation (called by one county agency director the “brownie bank” method of reciprocity) and residents’ interest in forest stewardship. Resources in lower capacity communities that can be accessed to facilitate the CWPP process include local leaders such as VFD chiefs, networks access through community organizations such as water boards, or education opportunities at regular informal neighborhood events such as barbecues. Small or lower capacity communities are especially vulnerable if they lose even one local champion, supportive government agency staff or community-based organization leadership. In these communities it is particularly important to acknowledge and respect local culture and leadership.



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Higher capacity communities aren't necessarily more successful in their CWPP processes and, in some higher capacity communities completing a CWPP, community capacity has not been created or strengthened. In cases where contractors were hired to write or implement a CWPP with little involvement from local organizations or community leaders, there was little or no change in social capacity, especially leadership or public trust. In other cases, conflict over forest management goals or distrust between agencies and organizations limited collaboration and collective action.

Building community capacity through the CWPP process

By working on CWPPs, community members draw upon, and in turn enhance, the constellation of human, social, political, and economic assets of their community. Collaboration for CWPPs can help build community assets as community members develop leadership skills and build ties with community organizations and government agencies. Through collaboration, they identify and address risk, develop a sense of common purpose, and pose an agenda for action. Community leaders involved in CWPPs help increase residents' understanding, responsibility and support for wildfire mitigation strategies, as well as work with contractors, researchers, and government leaders to provide access to information and financial resources. Demonstration projects, maps, assessments and field trips sponsored by CWPPs have not only enhanced residents' understanding of wildfire and ethic of stewardship, but their sense of community. CWPP participants reported a new sense of hope, trust and respect.

CWPPs that provide opportunities for residents to participate in neighborhood fuel reduction projects, emergency planning, and other risk mitigation activities are more likely to receive public support which, in turn, broadens the base of political support. Community leaders can serve as "ambassadors" for the Plan, advocate for federal and state forest management projects and policies, and assist in further public outreach. In contrast, CWPPs which are contractor or agency-driven with little community involvement, although acceptable or satisfactory to guide organizational programs and budgets, are not as likely to be embraced by the community.

Capacity was enhanced when CWPP process conveners consciously identified, strengthened and built relationships which in turn created the capacity for further planning and implementation. Once the core group was established, the circle widened as soon as possible; new members (e.g., federal agency fire mitigation specialists, local environmental organization members, and retired professionals with organizational or technical skills) were engaged in order to collect multiple capacities and perspectives. CWPP groups worked with regional planners and government partners, who could support planning, tap new resources, influence decisions, and help sustain the process. They also used informal systems, neighborhood networks and social events to bring a community together. Community members were recruited through multiple information-sharing methods: newsletters, bulletin boards, community meetings, demonstration projects, and cleanup days.

"We can't do new stuff alone, we can just do that same tired stuff that got us into this predicament. So only by working with the community folks that live here, only by constantly meeting and talking and hashing it out and doing little stuff at a time can that be done."
- Federal Mitigation Specialist

