



COMMUNITY BENEFITS OF CWPPs

Community Wildfire Protection Plans improve the ability of a neighborhood, community or county to work together and get things done – key elements of “community capacity.” Both WGA and NFP recognized the importance of building community 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 of communities to create and take advantage of opportunities, knowledge, and connections among people and organizations to get work done.

One CWPP participant stated it this way: *Really it turned out they needed to deal with organizational capacity, much more than wildfire. Having stronger organizational capacity was ultimately going to help them address wildfire and every other vulnerability that that community has.*

Building community. 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 because community members develop leadership, and build ties between 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.

How did they do this? 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 to more diverse local leaders and community organizations. New members (e.g., federal agency fire mitigation specialists, local environmental organization members, community development organizations and retired professionals with organizational or technical skills) got engaged. CWPP groups worked with regional planners and government partners who could support planning, tap new resources, influence decisions, and help sustain the planning process. They also used informal neighborhood gatherings 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 clean-up days.

Capacity varies across communities and planning processes. 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 providing access to resources (money, information, contractors) which help implement neighborhood projects or complete a community-level CWPP. Communities with few 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. Formal leaders such as volunteer fire department chiefs, community organizations such as Water Boards or regular informal neighborhood events such as barbecues can bring a community together to successfully mount a CWPP effort. Firewise Communities and Fire Safe Councils can be useful to sustain them.

High capacity communities aren’t necessarily more successful in their CWPP processes and, in some cases, completing a CWPP did not create or strengthen their community capacity. For instance, in cases where contractors were hired to write or implement a CWPP with little involvement from local organizations or community leaders, there was little leadership and organizational development, nor enhanced public trust in implementation. In other cases, conflict over forest management goals or distrust between agencies and organizations limited collaboration and collective action. Some communities simply appended a CWPP as a chapter in another plan, such as a pre-disaster mitigation plan or community alternative to a proposed management plan. Some plans’ assessments and strategies were technical and complex but not grounded in pragmatic realities or adequately shared with communities.

CWPPs can engage community members in safety and stewardship initiatives that can build community capacity by mobilizing assets from within or without. It is important to acknowledge and respect local culture and leadership; small communities are especially vulnerable if they lose their government agency staff or community-based organization leadership.

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. (BLM mitigation specialist)

This notebook [plan] is not what it’s about – it’s a living, dynamic process. It’s about cooperatively responding to peoples’ needs and recognizing the strength of diversity. (Volunteer fire department chief)

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