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Development and Implementation of Community Wildfire Protection Plans in Oregon

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GAO Five Year Update on Wildland Fire and Forest Service/Bureau of Land Management Accomplishments in Implementing
the Healthy Forests Restoration Act

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, Thank you for inviting me to testify on the progress of Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) development and implementation in Oregon and the opportunities and challenges for professional foresters this process presents. I am currently a District Forester in the South Cascade District of the Oregon Department of Forestry. My district provides fire protection and forestry technical assistance on approximately 1 million acres of private and public forest land in the Cascade foothills, in the Southern Willamette Valley. I'm here today as a professional forester representing the Society of American Foresters (SAF), the nation's largest professional society for foresters in the world. The over 15,000 members of SAF around the country and throughout the world are committed to sound stewardship of our forest resources through sustainable forest management.

Community Wildfire Protection planning presents great opportunities for professional foresters to help communities become better prepared to address wildfire threats and at the same time, help educate communities and private landowners about the need to address other forest management issues through a landscape planning approach. This is why, last year, SAF joined with the National Association of State Foresters (NASF), the National Association of Counties (NACO), the Western Governors' Association (WGA), and the Communities Committee, to develop and distribute a handbook designed to help communities put together these plans in compliance with the guidelines in the Healthy Forests Restoration Act.

To date, over 6,000 copies of the Handbook have been distributed to governors, state and local government leaders, professional foresters, and interested citizens across the country and in Canada. Numerous workshops have been held to help community leaders put together these plans, with foresters and other planning experts providing guidance to help them through this process. We estimate that community wildfire protection plans have been developed for over 600 communities around the country. This represents a significant change in thinking about wildfires that involves the communities and the people that live in and around our forests and are most at risk from wildfires.

Benefits of CWPP Process

Working with CWPPs and community fire planning under the National Fire Plan for several years now, I've witnessed the unprecedented opportunities this process creates. Below are some general observations of how CWPPs have improved the way we help communities reduce their risk from wildfires:

- CWPPs are offering many valuable opportunities to communities, allowing them to identify local priorities for community protection and resource management.
- HFRA is complimentary to the development of CWPPs as communities can use local priorities for fuels mitigation to shape management decisions on public lands surrounding them.
- ODF, federal partners, county partners, fire departments, and extension foresters are encouraging CWPP development and helping to facilitate local discussions about fire protection issues.
- Communities are taking ownership in development of CWPPs and utilizing federal and state agency technical assistance in fuels mitigation strategy, structural risk mitigation, and landscape level forest health treatments.
- CWPPs ultimately belong to the community and reflect the local discussions of a diverse range of interest groups. Collaboration is a key component to the success of CWPP development.

- Stakeholder surveys are a useful tool in assessing a community's ideas on the issues and actions needed to improve overall wildfire safety in the wildland-urban interface. This also actively engages stakeholders in the process of CWPP development.
- The Preparing a Community Wildfire Protection Plan template developed by NASF, SAF, WGA, NACO, and the Communities Committee is being used extensively by communities in Oregon as they develop local CWPPs.
- The Preparing a Community Wildfire Protection Plan template meets HFRA requirements, provides concise, step by step instructions and provides opportunities for public involvement through public meetings. This is a good template for communities to use if they want to meet HFRA requirements and they are in a county that has already done the FEMA wildfire chapter.
- Most importantly, the CWPP process is allowing foresters to do their job, applying the proven practices of silviculture to ultimately achieve forest health and other forest management goals on both public and private lands. The CWPP process is facilitating fuels reduction and forest health treatments across the landscape and helping to meet the goals of HFRA and the Healthy Forests Initiative.

CWPP Success stories from Oregon

To demonstrate the above observations, I'd like to share some specific examples where CWPPs helped communities deal with often controversial issues and in the end, helped better protect themselves for fire risk and better manage their forested landscape.

My experience while working with the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) on National Fire Plan implementation has helped shape my perspective on the usefulness of CWPPs. While working in the Eastern Oregon Area ODF office from 2001-2004, I was charged with developing an implementation plan for the Department's use of National Fire Plan grant funding. Foresters with the Oregon Department of Forestry utilized NFP grant funding to start fuels reduction projects in high risk wildland urban interface areas in Central Oregon, South East Oregon and South West Oregon. Individual treatments around homes in high risk areas were linked together to provide community fuel breaks around subdivisions. In many areas (Sumpter, Canyon City, Crescent, Gilchrist, Sisters to name a few) federal agencies were able to complete fuels treatments on the outskirts of high risk communities. Over time, these strategic mitigation projects in the interface combined with landscape level treatments on adjacent federal lands will help restore declining forest health in areas of Oregon.

Today, foresters are assisting the public and communities with preparing Community Wildfire Protection Plans to further increase the effectiveness of creating defensible space around homes as well as treating the larger forest landscape. The collaborative efforts of foresters from the federal and state agencies, rural fire departments, private landowners, local governmental agencies, volunteer organizations, and concerned citizens who live in the wildland urban interface have resulted in the development of approximately 64 CWPPs throughout Oregon.

From Southwest Oregon (Jackson and Josephine Counties): "Fuels treatment and fire prevention efforts are all around us. It is a great time to get people involved. The big fires of 2002 and 2003 have brought fire protection into our living rooms. As a result, little groups are springing up everywhere and are receiving education and assistance to help them understand what they can do to create defensible space in their communities; they are providing a lot of energy to the CWPP effort. In some cases we are seeing projects accomplished even when grant money isn't available. People are now spreading out, away from their homes, and modifying fuels beyond the immediate defensible space area. Success is not just the development of a document; it is the connections that those in the forestry/fire professions are making with non traditional partners in their communities."

From Northeast Oregon: "What we have gained from this experience is something you can't capture in a written document. We have enlightened the public about our roles (all agencies) in wildfire protection and what they (the public) can do to help themselves. The public understands what fuels reduction means and how collaborative efforts with all the agencies can help to reduce the risk of fire in the interface and at the same time increase the resiliency of the forests in which they live. It is difficult to report the success of community planning efforts – you can't measure the public's appreciation of the efforts that foresters and fire experts have put into helping them create defensible space around their homes and working towards longer term forest health improvements."

From the Crescent/Gilchrist area: "Our CWPP steering group received a wonderful compliment from the private sector in one of our high risk, high priority areas. They were proud to be involved with a group that is so well represented by ALL agencies and interests, even industrial timber land owners. They couldn't believe that so many people have come together to give so many volunteer hours for the cause of Community Wildfire Protection."

From Lane County in the Southern Willamette Valley: "In Lane County an extensive working structure has been established for developing a county-wide CWPP. The plan development process involves bringing together local, state and federal fire agencies as well as public and private landowners to contribute to the plan content. Local fuel reduction strategies and public outreach programs already in place will be identified and documented as well as opportunities for implementing new ones.

On a smaller scale, the Oregon Department of Forestry is working with rural fire departments, foresters from Willamette National Forest, and community officials to develop individual CWPPs for the Upper McKenzie River area and the Oakridge/West Fir communities. These smaller scale CWPPs will specifically target the wildland-urban interface fuels treatment needs on private land as well as identifying key fuels treatments on adjacent federal land. USFS officials are working collaboratively with state foresters and stakeholders in the communities to identify key issues, and concerns on wildfire risk that exists on federal lands. The extent that the Willamette National Forest can obtain funding for fuels management projects adjacent to these communities, will ultimately demonstrate that the goals of HFRA and the CWPP process are being met."

Recommendations

Community Wildfire Protection Planning is still very much a work in progress and will take time and leadership from all involved, including Congress, all levels of government, professional foresters, and concerned stakeholders to make it successful. Maintaining a consistent level of funding and technical assistance for hazardous fuel reductions projects through HFRA or the NFP is integral to helping communities be successful in carrying out their newly developed CWPPs.

A commitment must be made to allow communities and stakeholders easy access to the information and resources they need to develop CWPPs. The Oregon Department of Forestry is taking the lead in developing a website where CWPP templates, examples, grant opportunities, risk assessment information, and technical assistance contact information would be readily available for communities starting the CWPP process. A concerted, nation-wide effort needs to be made to make these resources available to low-capacity communities who don't always have the resources or expertise available to start a collaborative planning effort.

The Pacific Northwest Region National Fire Plan Strategy Team is a partnership consisting of representatives from agencies or organizations in Oregon and Washington that have a role in implementing the National Fire Plan. This team of professionals has a key role in providing technical assistance to help communities build capacity; implement and provide oversight to the Healthy Forest Restoration Act; work with state and county governments to ensure community interests and needs are taken into account when funding NFP projects; and promoting regional and local level collaboration. This Team will help in getting the needed information and resources to communities in the PNW region. A similar approach could be taken in other areas.

In addition to this, Congress and the Administration need to support monitoring and evaluation efforts of the CWPP process to assess the success of the process and enable application of lessons learned to other areas of forest management.

While SAF is supportive of the increased emphasis through HFRA and the Healthy Forests Initiative on forest health and wildfire risk reduction, there is still a need for greater reforms within the federal agencies to address the need for better, more comprehensive management and restoration of our forests. Building on the concepts in HFRA, we, as a nation, need to continuously seek opportunities to work across ownership boundaries, in partnership with all landowners, to manage our forests comprehensively. CWPPs begin to create this comprehensive approach, and we urge similar partnerships and collaborations for forest management and restoration across the country, not just in fire-prone forests.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I'm happy to answer any questions you might have.