

COLLABORATION ACROSS BOUNDARIES: A POLICY PERSPECTIVE ON THE STATE OF WILDLAND FIRE*

Vicki Christiansen

Fire itself can be a gnarly challenge, and the challenges have gotten gnarlier in recent decades.

The topic of collaboration across boundaries is fitting for me and for the Forest Service because our national priorities revolve around just that—collaboration across boundaries—especially when it comes to wildland fire. We are committed to improving the conditions of the Nation's forests, being good neighbors, and sharing stewardship through partnerships, including with many of you here.

My personal passion is connecting people with their natural resources—whether as partners, as volunteers, as homeowners, or just as citizens—and, as you know, there are plenty of opportunities for all that in the wildland–urban interface (WUI). Collaborating across boundaries goes to the core of the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy, especially when it comes to the WUI.

Vicki Christiansen is the Interim Chief for the Forest Service, Washington, DC.

** The article is based on a speech delivered by the author at Wildland–Urban Interface 2018, a conference held in Reno, NV, on February 27, 2018.*



Vicki Christiansen (second from left), Forest Service Deputy Chief for State and Private Forestry (now Forest Service Interim Chief), participating in the Wildfire Mitigation Awards ceremony at the WUI 2018 conference. With Chief Christiansen are (from left to right) Chief Tom Jenkins, Fire Chief for the city of Rogers, AR, and President and Chair of the Board for the International Association of Fire Chiefs; Lorraine Carli, Vice President for Outreach and Advocacy, National Fire Protection Association; Chief Ken Pimlott, Director of Cal Fire; and Abby Watkins of Newaygo County Emergency Services, White Cloud, MI, one of nine recipients of the Wildfire Mitigation Award for 2018. Photo: International Association of Fire Chiefs.

National Outlook

At the national level, we have some gnarly challenges ahead. Fire itself can be a gnarly challenge, meaning complex and difficult to deal with, and the challenges have gotten gnarlier in recent decades. In fact, we have changed our language to talk about the fire year instead of the fire season. Over the last few decades, the western fire season has grown at least 2½ months longer, and we have seen the frequency, size, and severity of wildfires increase. Primary drivers are

drought, fuel buildups, and increasing development in the WUI. All these trends are expected to continue.

Last year, we had one of the most severe fire seasons in recent history, with more than 10 million acres (4 million ha) burned nationwide. About 12,000 structures were destroyed by wildfires, including more than 8,000 homes. That is more than five times higher than the annual average of about 1,500 homes destroyed by wildfire.

There are forces at play in our operating environment over which we have little or no control.

- During 2017, wildfire activity occurred consistently throughout the year, beginning with the Fall 2016 Fire Siege in the Southeast and continuing in the Great Plains, Southwest, and West in the spring and summer.
- The year progressed with far above-average fire activity, which started earlier than usual in the Northern Rockies and included an active season in the Northwest.
 - » In early July, Montana and northern Idaho had mainly lightning-caused fires in rugged, remote, timbered areas. Many would become long-duration fires (such as the Lolo Peak and Rice Ridge Fires in Montana).
 - » In late July, there were similar scenarios in Oregon, Washington, and northern California.
 - » And central and southern California had geographically dispersed human- and lightning-caused fires from summer through early 2018. All this solidified the term “fire year” rather than “fire season.”
- Nationally, more than 10 million acres (4 million ha) burned

across all jurisdictions. This was a 53-percent increase in acres burned compared to the 10-year average of 6.6 million acres (2.7 million ha).

- A total of 2.9 million acres (1.17 million ha) burned on National Forest System lands alone. That was a 92-percent increase in acres compared to the 10-year average of 1.5 million acres (0.61 million ha).
- During 2017, the national preparedness level was at level 4 or 5 for 75 days.

We are in a “new normal of fire activity.” During the peak of fire activity in 2017, about 29,000 fire personnel were deployed. No single agency has the resources to respond to these complex fires ... it really does take everyone! Some of our collective resources are already out on fires again in 2018, and we expect the year-round fire season trend to continue.

Last year, total fire-related costs for the Forest Service were \$2.4 billion,

making it the most expensive fire year in history.

- To cover this cost, we transferred nearly \$526 million from other accounts.
- This came from programs that support national forest activities, such as forest management and hazardous fuel reduction, and programs that support working across boundaries with partners, such as State and volunteer fire assistance.
- In addition to these fire transfers, the increasing 10-year-average cost of fire suppression creates ongoing erosion of our agency’s nonfire budgets (on the order of a \$100- to \$120-million erosion each year).

All this puts tremendous strain on our fire personnel, our nonfire programs, and our agency budgets. In 1995, fire made up 16 percent of the Forest Service’s annual appropriated budget. Last year, about 56 percent of our annual budget was dedicated to wildfire. Along with this shift in resources, there has been a corresponding shift in staff, with a 39-percent reduction in all nonfire personnel. Left unchecked, the share of the budget devoted to fire in 2021 could exceed 67 percent. That equates to reductions of nearly \$700 million from nonfire programs.

Fortunately, Congress included a fire funding fix in its omnibus appropriations bill for fiscal year 2018. The bill, passed by Congress on March 23, 2018, set up an emergency suppression fund for Federal agencies to draw on in fiscal years 2020–27. This solution will let us secure our operating environment by stabilizing our



Firefighters on the Thomas Fire on the Los Padres National Forest near Ventura, CA, in December 2017. The Thomas Fire was the largest in California history at the time, burning 281,893 acres (114,078 ha). Photo: USDA Forest Service.

rising fire suppression budget. We will finally start treating catastrophic wildfires as disasters, dramatically reducing the need to transfer funds from other work. The bill also gives us new tools and expanded authorities to do more to improve forest conditions and deliver values and benefits from forests to the American people. Now it's up to the Forest Service to deliver.

My Leadership Journey

So that's my perspective on what's happening at the national level. But as we all know, fires don't happen at the national level. To paraphrase one former politician, "All wildfire is local." Fire happens in a local context, but that context is a system that is incredibly complex.

We are in a Wildland Fire System, where a full suite of environmental, social, political, financial, and cultural factors drive outcomes in the wildland fire environment (fig. 1). The Wildland Fire System has pieces connected to civil society, to responders, to communities, and to landscapes, including forces at play in our operating environment over which we have little or no control. The Wildland Fire System acknowledges and invites the participation of a broader set of stakeholders in addressing current unacceptable outcomes.

The Wildland Fire System is so incredibly complex that no single entity can do it alone—not the Forest Service, not the States, not any given fire department. We are all in this Wildland Fire System together. Everyone in this room has a role to play, in one way or another, in helping local communities prepare for wildfire ... by creating healthier landscapes, by preparing for an effective response to wildfire, and

by reducing risk to communities through effective mitigation.

My own personal realization of the Wildland Fire System—my "ah-hah moment"—came when I was a brand-new State Forester in the State of Washington in 2006. We

That's when it hit me: I needed to help change the conversation.

had the Tripod Fire Complex, which burned more than 175,000 acres in Okanogan County. Much of the area burned was on the Okanogan–Wenatchee National Forest, where many of the trees were dead or dying due to drought and beetle infestation. The fire cost \$110 million to suppress, including \$13

million from State efforts. We had to catch the fire on the eastern flank, which was under State jurisdiction and where the forests had been thinned on the Loomis State Forest.

As State Forester, my total annual budget for fire suppression was \$13 million, so that one fire ate up our entire fire budget. We had to ask the legislature for a \$60-million supplemental appropriation. As you might imagine, fingers were pointing every which way, and I kept looking over my shoulder to see who was going to come clean up this mess.

That's when it hit me: I needed to help change the conversation. We needed to spend our energy finding collective solutions, not pointing fingers about who had the most responsibility for the wildland fire problem in this Nation.

Warren Buffett once said, "In a chronically leaking boat, energy



Figure 1—The Wildland Fire System, with its five components.

devoted to changing vessels is more productive than energy devoted to patching leaks.”

That’s what we needed to do: stop patching leaks by placing blame and instead build a new vessel by changing the conversation. I spoke up at a meeting of the Forest Fire Committee of the National Association of State Foresters. I talked about the need for taking a

the strategy was the Four Forests Restoration Initiative, which involves restoration treatments across nearly a million acres of dry pine forest on four national forests.

This effort has transcended governors of different political parties. A new paradigm of working together to create resilient landscapes and fire-adapted communities is taking hold.

develop a truly shared national approach to wildland fire management. Based on that earlier footprint from Emmetsburg, MD, we developed a National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy. The strategy was and is a broad-based collaborative response with three national goals:

1. restoring and maintaining resilient landscapes;
2. creating fire-adapted communities; and
3. safe and effective wildfire response, with decisions based on risk analysis for all ownerships.

A new paradigm of working together to create resilient landscapes and fire-adapted communities is taking hold

more proactive approach. Thirteen of us in national fire leadership roles came together at the National Fire Academy in Emmetsburg, MD. Together, we built the initial footprint of the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy.

My next appointment as State Forester was in Arizona. Most of you have probably heard of the Rodeo–Chediski Fire. In 2002, it burned more than 468,000 acres (189,000 ha), making it the largest wildfire in Arizona State history at the time. Over 490 structures were destroyed, and more than 30,000 residents were evacuated.

As a result, a Governor’s Forest Health Council was formed, and the Statewide Strategy for Restoring Arizona Forests was developed in response to citizens’ concerns about the health of Arizona’s forests. Traditional adversaries came together for a common purpose, and the strategy presented a 20-year roadmap for restoring forest health and protecting rural communities from wildfire. A major outcome of

My point is this: we need to recognize how complex the Wildland Fire System is and how huge the wildland fire problem is, driven by factors like long-term drought and beetle infestations that affect enormous parts of our country. And the projections are that these trends will continue due to a changing climate. We have a new normal, so why do we keep responding in old ways?

As someone once said, “People who change after change, will survive; people who change with change, will succeed; people who cause change will lead.”

National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy

We need to cause change by recognizing that the wildfire problem requires a new approach. Congress gave us a big leadership push with the 2009 FLAME Act when it required the creation of a national cohesive strategy.

That caused us to act. The stakeholders all came together to

The vision for the Cohesive Strategy is, *“To safely and effectively extinguish fire when needed; use fire where allowable; manage our natural resources; and as a Nation, to live with wildland fire.”* This vision acknowledges that there are different missions and authorities among us ... whether we are local, State, Tribal, or Federal fire managers. On most Federal and Tribal lands, we are fire managers AND land managers on the same piece of ground. By contrast, most State and local fire managers protect someone else’s property.

The Cohesive Strategy causes us to look the Wildfire Paradox squarely in the eye: fire is a bad boss but a good servant. We must take the long view, accepting the inevitability of fire visiting our landscapes and preparing ourselves so that when fire does come calling, the consequences are not devastating. Whenever possible, we need to reintroduce fire under conditions we choose. Fire is the primary change agent on many of our Federal lands and has been for millennia.

So the first pillar of the Cohesive Strategy is restoring healthy fire-adapted landscapes. That includes

The Cohesive Strategy causes us to look at the Wildfire Paradox squarely in the eye: fire is a bad boss but a good servant.

both thinning and prescribed fire treatments, and it means getting more fire on the land, not less. If we don't, then our fires are only going to get bigger, more explosive, and more dangerous to homes and communities.

We also need communities in fire-adapted landscapes that are prepared to mitigate risks from wildfire. Today, the WUI contains about a third of the housing units in the United States (44 million homes potentially at risk), and that number is growing, especially in parts of the South and West that are already at moderate to high risk of wildfire. We need to find ways to help landowners and communities expand hazardous fuels treatments and increase the resilience of their own homes and infrastructures.

And we also need an efficient and effective response to wildfire. Keeping people safe from wildfire is a central part of our job. Nothing is more important, and I want to pay tribute to the firefighters we lost in 2017. We are committed to making sound risk-based decisions that do not place the lives of firefighters at needless risk. Our goal is to commit emergency responders to operations where they can succeed in protecting lives and values at risk and then safely go home at the end of the day.

Those are the three pillars of our Cohesive Strategy. All three envision reintroducing fire to the landscape whenever possible under conditions



Prescribed fire in the wildland–urban interface to reduce fuels and protect homes in western Oregon. Photo: Bureau of Land Management.

we choose. We need to strike a balance among the five elements of the Wildland Fire System—social, cultural, political, environmental, and financial—in a way that more reliably protects responders and the public, sustains communities, and conserves the land.

Our Cohesive Strategy gives us a doctrine for getting there. It sets the stage for an all-lands national blueprint for creating synergies in wildland fire management. Our holistic approach to wildland fire management encourages further dialogue between local communities and national policymakers, and that dialogue is key.

Fire-Adapted Communities

That dialogue is key because creating fire-adapted communities is so central to our Cohesive Strategy. Before closing, I want to say a few words about that, even though I'm no expert ... you are, the people here today for this conference!

Creating fire-adapted communities means working from “the front door to the forest,” and that involves everyone. Everyone in the community is in this together, whether homeowners, fire departments, local governments, nonprofit groups, or local Federal land managers. Local cross-jurisdictional partnerships can be more effective in preparing a community for wildfire than any one group working alone.

As you know, the best way to reduce community risk is to harden homes and create defensible space, and that means getting property owners involved. It also means getting their friends and neighbors involved, along with other trusted folks in the community, such as the local fire department.

You don't get people to change their behavior by handing out brochures or leaving doorhangers or putting up signs and billboards. Those

Creating fire-adapted communities means working from “the front door to the forest,” and that involves everyone.

kinds of activities can help raise awareness and make information available. But we motivate people to act by engaging them face to face over time and building trust. Only when they're ready can we help them take the next steps. That's why we need to get friends, neighbors, and trusted members of the community involved.

As you know, the biggest barrier to fire-adapted communities is local capacity. Most folks in the WUI know they're at risk and are willing to take some kind of action, but they don't have the support network for that. A little support at the local level can go a long way.

Willingness to act depends on perception of risk. If you think the risk to your property is high, you're more likely to take action. That's why helping property owners understand the risk to their homes from wildfire can be so effective, especially during teachable moments when smoke is in the air.

All this points to the value of building strong cross-boundary mitigation collaboratives or partnerships to help communities

adapt to wildfire. One example is the community mitigation assistance team. These are teams of WUI mitigation practitioners who are expert at helping communities build local coalitions, at motivating people to act, and at getting them to take effective actions.

The only way to address the wildfire issue is collaboratively, and that's why you're here today, from many different communities of practice. If every forest, every fire department, every community in a fire-prone landscape had a sustainable and effective fire adaptation program, imagine how far we could get in achieving this key goal of the Cohesive Strategy. That's the challenge, and you in this room are leading the way. I salute you and thank you for all you do!

A Societal Issue Requiring Societal Solutions

In closing, fire may be a gnarly problem, but it is not a hopeless problem. It is a societal issue that requires contributions from multiple disciplines, creating synergies—where the sum of our efforts is greater than the individual parts.

We all come from different backgrounds, with different responsibilities—different communities of practice and of place. We all have different outlooks and different constituents, different constraints and opportunities. For example, State and local authorities might not have much leeway to restore fire to the landscape, while Federal agencies have more.

But we are all part of the same wildland fire community, and we all have significant influence on the Wildland Fire System. And I'm certain we all share the same interest in outcomes like healthy landscapes and fire-adapted communities. We need each other, and together we are stronger. We can anchor to our specific communities of practice and place and still bring our individual strengths to the table. We can still embrace other disciplines, including governance, civic engagement, and public policy. It will take all of us to overcome our gnarly challenges!

Gifford Pinchot, the first Chief of the Forest Service, was one of the earliest American visionaries of conservation. He put it well, and I quote: “The vast possibilities of our future will become realities only if we make ourselves responsible for the future.”

And that will take collaboration across boundaries. We are all in this together! ■