The size and severity of wildfires in the West have increased dramatically in the past two decades. For communities in the wildland urban interface, it is no longer about “if” a wildfire will come but “when.” In this context, it is vital that we create Fire Adapted Communities that can prepare for, respond to, and recover from wildfire with minimal social and economic disruption. Fostering community adaptation to wildfire means building strong local institutions that can engage in wildfire planning and strategic hazard mitigation, participate actively in wildfire response, and recover and learn from wildfires when they do come.

The National Cohesive Wildfire Strategy and the last two Quadrennial Fire Reviews call for local agencies and property owners to, “take responsibility and become active participants and an integral part” in curbing the negative effects of wildfire to communities. To succeed, government agencies need to work in close cooperation with rural communities that also play vital roles in wildfire management, and rural communities need federal and state support in their evolution to become increasingly fire adapted. Congressional and agency action can help local communities across the West become more effective agents in solving our nation’s growing “fire problem.”

**What is a Fire Adapted Community?**

Fire Adapted Communities (FAC) incorporate an understanding of natural fires and emphasize the value of foresight and investment. A FAC takes responsibility for its wildfire risk through actions that address resident safety, homes, neighborhoods, businesses and infrastructure, forests, parks, open spaces, and other community assets. The more actions a community takes, the more fire adapted it becomes. Becoming a fire-adapted community is a process not an end point.

The role of public-private partnerships is an essential component to this process. Effective partnerships, with shared responsibility, will create prepared communities and healthy, resilient landscapes. Fire adaptation requires a dedicated community; federal support; and a workforce of cross-trained practitioners able to facilitate collaborative efforts, engage numerous citizens, provide forest health and fire education, implement forestry projects, and mentor and empower rural citizens to take the steps necessary to more safely live with fire.

**Recommendations**

**Create long-term funding solutions to the increasing costs of wildfire on the Forest Service’s budget that reforms the way the federal government budgets for wildfire.**

In 2015, the federal government spent $2.13 billion managing over 65,000 fires on more than 1
10 million acres\(^4\). The current funding system has exacerbated the growing severity of wildfire's effects on local communities across the West by reducing the funding available to states and communities to take a proactive approach to fire hazard mitigation. The escalating costs are exhausting funding available for other essential programs. Annual fire transfers have crippled the Forest Service, creating instability and massive inefficiency across the agency. Continuing this budgeting approach creates unacceptable outcomes for our communities, our landscapes and our economies. Reforming fire funding will facilitate preparedness, maintenance and forest health programs, and safeguard these essential programs from fund transfers.

1. Congress must enact legislation that fixes the firefighting funding mechanism at the Department of the Interior and the USDA Forest Service.

2. A fire-funding fix must be comprehensive and include all of the following: eliminate fire transfers, provide access to disaster funding, and address how the increasing cost of firefighting impacts other agency programs.

Dramatically increase use of prescribed fire in the American West to improve the resilience of human communities and forest and grassland ecosystems.

Fire suppression and encroachment of developed lands into natural habitats has reduced the number and scale of healthy, naturally occurring fires. These developments have intensified the risk to rural communities by increasing fuel loading and arrangements across the landscape. In most western ecosystems, fire was a natural process involving frequent low- and mixed-intensity burning that limited fuel loadings.

Prescribed and managed fire is often the ecologically appropriate and the most cost effective approach to increase forest resiliency and reduce the negative impacts of uncharacteristic fire on human communities. Impediments to increasing prescribed fire use include: lack of skilled practitioners, high planning and implementation costs, insufficient public understanding and awareness, urbanization of WUI areas, liability concerns, and permitting and other legal concerns.

1. Support and facilitate use of prescribed fire by using authorities such as the Wyden Authority and Stevens Act funding, to promote cross-jurisdictional prescribed fire implementation with federal agencies, tribes, local and state fire services, community groups, and nonprofits.

2. Provide increased training and assistance to community-based partners, and state forestry and fire agencies, to enable them to utilize prescribed fire.

3. Increase the ability of federal and non-federal managers to allow natural ignitions to burn where appropriate.

4. Use federal policy to create incentives for municipalities, states, the fire services, tribes, and federal agencies to work together to increase prescribed fire, and use federal funding to incentivize cooperative approaches and projects.

Increase investments in a year-round cross-trained workforce.

Declines in the economic capacity of rural communities, increased unemployment, and the emigration of rural residents toward urban areas create a need to support the development and maintenance of high-skill, high-wage sustainable rural jobs in forest communities by prioritizing a cross-trained workforce where integration of fire response, landscape restoration, and fire hazard mitigation are paramount.

Private companies, local fire services, and nonprofit organizations in this sector increasingly need to engage in both forest and fire management to maintain a skilled workforce with living-wage year-round employment. The seasonality of fire suppression work often limits the ability of private and public sector employers to maintain a skilled workforce.

Increased funding for both the private and public sector workforce will facilitate a stable cross-trained workforce that will be more adept at contributing to the successes of landscape restoration and community protection efforts. This workforce is an essential element of Fire Adapted
Communities and essential to realizing the goals of the Cohesive Strategy.

1. Federal policy, procedures, and investments should be structured to create year-round jobs that have significant economic impact in our struggling rural communities near public lands.

2. Use procurement, grants, and agreements authorities to strategically create consistent work for private businesses, local NGOs, and local fire services, bridging fire response, FAC, and landscape resilience work where possible. Identifying successful and replicable models will serve as a pilot to increasing adoption of best practices.

3. Develop best-value contracting criteria and agreement funding that rewards entities who work across multiple cohesive strategy goals.

4. Provide increased incentive programs, low interest loans and lower cost insurance options to local community-based forest and fire management businesses and organizations.

5. Provide increased cooperative training opportunities to forestry sector business owners, nonprofits, managers, and workers to help them access the full diversity of fire-related contracts and agreements.

**Increase funding for community protection.**

Landscape-scale restoration funding has increased over the past decade to restore and increase resilience on priority landscapes; however, funding has lagged for communities working toward community fire adaptation and resilience. It is vital that communities are able to reduce the risks associated with wildfires by engaging in numerous activities, ranging from managing forests, to educating homeowners about their home’s structural vulnerabilities and surrounding fuel loading, to creating evacuation plans when the fire occurs.

Increasing funding for community-based approaches will allow for cohesive and context-specific mitigation of wildfire risk. In coordination with landscape-scale treatments, over time, this will increase and safeguard a future for rural communities while reducing costs of fighting fires and risks to firefighters.

1. Increase funding allocations to community-based organizations working toward fire adaptation. Alignment of funding with existing landscape-scale projects ensures that cross boundary efforts are more effective.

2. Ensure funding is flexible and allows for numerous activities, including funding for outreach, community education, Community Wildfire Protection planning, and local fire response, along with reducing fuel loading and applying prescribed fire.

3. Prioritize funding to projects within identified Wildland Urban Interface areas and for priority communities at-risk.

**Conclusion**

Wildfire is inevitable in the naturally fire-adapted forests of the West, but proactive forest fuel reduction and prescribed fire application, communication, planning, and preparedness can increase the safety of communities and help ecosystems and communities to recover from large wildfires when they do come. Together neighbors, homeowners, land managers, firefighters, planners, and leaders have the power to build fire-adapted communities and resilient landscapes that efficiently and effectively mitigate the threat and impacts of wildfires while contributing to the well-being of rural communities.
The Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition (RVCC) promotes new approaches to the ecological and economic problems facing the rural West. We are committed to developing practical solutions through collaborative, place-based work that recognizes the inextricable link between the long-term health of the land and the well-being of communities. We work together to improve issues that affect rural communities, public and private land management, and the continuation of a natural resource-based economy in the West, advocating for the inclusion of comprehensive community interests.

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