

Wildland Fire Leadership Council Meeting

Ashland, OR
July 28-29, 2015

Background

The Wildland Fire Leadership Council (WFLC), met for two days in Ashland, Oregon on July 28-29, 2015. The first day consisted of a field tour and community discussions focused on the Ashland Forest All-lands Restoration (AFAR) project. AFAR is a collaborative stewardship project aimed at creating resilient forest landscapes. The second day consisted of presentations and deliberations.

Meeting Objectives

To utilize learning from the field tour and community discussions, finalize objectives supporting the priority actions, and set strategic direction to positively impact agencies and organizations represented by WFLC members and the wildland fire community. Explicit goals included:

- Set strategic organizational direction to further activities similar to what was experienced on the field tour and follow up discussions;
- Discuss and formalize objectives under priority actions as presented by the NSC and RSCs;
- Address critical issues and opportunities;
- Identify strategies (internal and external) to support WFLC decisions;
- Explore and learn from the Ashland experience as a step in scaling toward bigger, better faster

Agreements, Action Items & Next Steps

Objective Setting for Priorities

Utilizing the NSC priority document, the WFLC conversation coalesced around the four areas: (1) smoke / air quality, (2) environmental compliance, (3) fire adapted communities, and (4) large landscape scale collaboratives – with wildland fire response folded into each. The Executive Manager will work to frame each of these components in consultation with co-chairs, the WFLC, and the NSC.

Using the NSC document, the WFLC decided that objectives under Priority 1 were for:

- (1) The NSC to bring together a joint agency/partnership collaborative to evaluate and recommend ways to work collaboratively on federal government regulatory processes in order to get to a set of shared best management practices. (They decided “Outcome 1” in the NSC document and how best to do shared learning would come later.)

(2) For smoke, the group decided they wanted to go beyond shared learning to improving the opportunities for smoke (i.e. loosening the limitations to prescribed burning) and getting communities on board for fire mitigation tasks. The text in the NSC document around this objective reads: “Smoke/Ozone issues with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) – Create a forum with state air quality regulators, EPA, WFLC and other state partners to evaluate inconsistencies in implementation of air quality regulations and as an opportunity for consistent tracking of air quality, particularly for prescribed fire implementation. This would be tiered from the national level with national activities/discussions, down to the regional and state level.”

Under Priority 2, one of the NSC’s tasks will be determining the important parameters for Fire Adapted Communities (FAC), likelihood of success, and resource dependency. The focus should be building necessary suite of enabling conditions for FAC.

Tasks discussed under large landscape collaboratives included (1) undertaking a data call and (2) sharing information. The WFLC will focus on landscapes more broadly; the Department of Interior may take a deep dive on the sage grass steppe. They decided that Priority 3 should be included in the other objectives identified but specifically the work under priority 2 with FAC.

Administrative Items

The next meeting of the WFLC may be moved to the week of November 9th. An interim call will be scheduled in mid-September to check-in with the NSC. Florida may be the option for the winter meeting.

MEETING SUMMARY

Council Members (or alternates)

Ken Berg (USGS), Robert Bonnie (USDA), Steve Ellis (BLM), Jim Karels (NASF), Michael Haydon (FWS), Ernie Mitchell (FEMA), Bob Roper (IAFC), Louis Rowe (NPS), Kris Sarri (DOI), Dan Shoun (NACo), Vernon Sterns (ITC), Tom Tidwell (USFS), George Geissler (NGA), Mike Zupko (Executive Manager)

Support Staff: Jim Douglas, Jim Hubbard, David McCoy, Kim Thorsen, Vicki Christiansen

National Strategy Committee (NSC): Pete Anderson, Patti Blankenship, Lynn Decker, Jim Erickson, Tom Harbour, Katie Lighthall, Matt Rollins, Joe Stutler, Brad Washa, (Mike Haydon)

Local Partners and Public: Marko Bey, Darren Borgias, Don Boucher, Chris Chambers, Cecelia Clavet, Craig Goodell, Lynn Jungworth, John Karns, Rob MacWhorter, Marty Main, Mike McArthur, George McKinley, Kerry Metlen, Donna Mickley, John O’Connor, Paul Orbeck, Jim Pena, Caitlyn Pollihan, Tom Quigley, Sandy Schaffer, Annie Schmidt, Mark Stern, John Stromberg, Bill Tripp, Ann Walker

Facilitators: Kathleen Rutherford assisted by Caitlin Doughty (Kolibri Consulting Group)

JULY 28

Field Tour Summary

The WFLC visited multiple sites and heard numerous presentations from Ashland stakeholders. Morning site visits included: Lithia Park, Reeder Reservoir, White Rabbit Trailhead, and the Epstein Property. The intent behind the field tour was to learn about the ecological setting in which Ashland community members were handling fire mitigation and the history of their engagement with different sectors, including federal agencies, the city, broader community, private landowners, youth, etc. The presentations and discussion that unfolded in the morning highlighted the complex nature of the Ashland area (i.e. steep slopes, granitic soil, and proximity to the municipal watershed) and the strategies that the different players used to build AFAR (city investment, community engagement, youth workforce training, etc.).

In the afternoon, the group listened to presentations on community integration within Ashland as well as how the Ashland experience expanded to other watersheds in the region. Vicki Christiansen, Associate Deputy Chief, State and Private Forestry, Forest Service, facilitated a discussion on reflections from the field. The conversation started on the importance of taking risk and the need for that risk to be shared across stakeholder groups – the Forest Service, the city, and the community. As a way to communicate the importance of shared risk taking, Ashland explained the risk of *not taking action* to the public. The intentional engagement with the community – from youth to private land owners – including going door to door, built a sense of shared ownership of the AFAR and thus the willingness to accept risk. WFLC members also saw an alignment of collective resources that focused on the strengths of each organization participating. A key component of this was for the Forest Service to be open to external expertise and adopt a learning stance. The WFLC discussed these items further on the second day.

JULY 29

Welcome

Co-chairs Kris Sarri, Assistant Secretary, Department of Interior and Robert Bonnie, Undersecretary Department of Agriculture, welcomed the Council and thanked everyone for taking the time for the meeting – with special thanks to the National Strategy Committee (NSC) for their work creating the priorities document. They also expressed their gratitude to Mayor John Stromberg and the other local partners for making the field trip on the previous day possible.

Co-chairs Kris Sarri and Robert Bonnie also gave their impressions of the field trip. They felt that the Ashland work embodies the work of the Cohesive Strategy. The tie between fire and broader issues such as ecosystem services, public health, and drinking water was an important component of Ashland's success. Finally, the Ashland example reaffirmed that partnerships are an essential component of this work and something for the WFLC to keep in mind within its internal work and in relationships with the NSC.

Facilitator Kathleen Rutherford added her welcome to the Council and reviewed the day's objectives, agenda and ground rules. The Council affirmed the agenda and ground rules.

USFS Chief Tidwell presented Mayor Stromberg with a gift on behalf of the WFLC, in appreciation for the work that Ashland has accomplished.

Stakeholder Discussion on Opportunities for WFLC Engagement

AFAR stakeholders joined the WFLC to explore the reasons for success in Ashland and to what extent key elements might be scaled and replicated elsewhere in the country.

(1) What challenges or success stories would you like to see the WFLC engage around?

Successes mentioned: integrated planning and implementation, engaging private land owners, and using an external body to analyze the project. Most of the successes were communicated as tasks that could be replicated elsewhere (see below).

Challenges discussed: the misalignment between smoke management under the Clean Air Act and forestry, limited funding, a disconnect between the language on secure rural schools in Title III and fire adapted communities (FAC) in the Cohesive Strategy (CS), the importance of consistent Forest Service staff in these communities, and maintaining consistent, high frequency public outreach to build an educated community that fire management is synonymous with natural resource management.

(2) What about the Ashland context can be broken down and replicated elsewhere (tools, strategies, lessons learned, etc.)?

Replicable actions presented: increase opportunities for intergenerational capacity building (through funding and supportive language in the CS), add community engagement as a budget item, use stewardship agreements in place of contracts – and create the staff and capacity to support these agreements at the same level as local partners and for extended periods of time (build continuity), encourage and enable local ownership and investment, maintain a base of science, build transparency, invest in understanding cultural sensitivity to build community and common understanding, and engage private landowners.

(3) What could the WFLC do to facilitate that replication?

Elevate the conversation around the natural resource benefit of wildfire management, incentivize consistency and continuity in their organizations' strategies, encourage policies that allow fire to be used as a tool, increase youth participation, publicize the importance of fire and management in the interval before and after ignition, and educate the public on good and bad fire – and change policies around good and bad smoke.

The stakeholder dialogue sparked several WFLC conversations. First, the WFLC members said they would get to work on the language barrier in Title III. The WFLC then asked the local presenters to share their best ideas for finding common ground. One local representative suggested identifying the outliers early on, such as the people that want to remove human

involvement in the forest, and engage them to identify the best strategies to get them on board. Another proposed investing in local capacity and facilitation services – stating that a good process can mitigate many problems. Other options discussed included: articulate the cost of not taking action, improve the marketing of projects, and maintain science as the common currency.

Suggestions as to how to communicate the value of the CS nationally included: use the FAC learning network and communities as ambassadors, encourage the Fire Service to adopt the CS, and mention the CS to the media and public in press releases and other communications during a fire – or immediately afterwards rather than a week later. Specifically, how implementing/not implementing the CS is helping or limiting the ability to fight the fire.

Finally, they discussed what the WFLC can do to support building local capacity including: incentivize the states to support collaboratives, change the perception that smoke is bad to smoke is part of a process, and encourage a mutually beneficial relationship between the Forest Service and communities.

Reflection on AHA Moment and Opportunities from the Tour

In order to bridge to the WFLC aspiration of “bigger, better, faster,” the WFLC was asked to answer the question: what did you hear from the tour or conversation this morning that is a key AHA moment for you? What could you communicate, replicate, scale, or work on in your agency to build on something learned from the Ashland experience?

AHA Moments included the: importance of using social science to see if messages were resonating in communities, power of using a stewardship agreement (versus a contract), unintended consequences in policy barriers specifically for smoke management, value in recognizing shared risk for increasing cooperation, and the need to market success (immediately when the fire is occurring).

Replicate/Scale/Work On included: apply both social and hard science when setting policies and prioritize communities, where possible use agreements instead of contracts, explore mechanisms that allow more people to come to the table and participate in an efficient matter, build a clearinghouse for financial and educational opportunities, document analyze, and share the impacts, damages and successes where fire management has and has not been done, use local fire units and others as ambassadors for the CS, and share risk across federal agencies.

Discussion on Priority Objectives and Actions Priority Actions

The objective of the afternoon session was to solidify the intent of the priorities agreed to in April, and agree to at least three objectives to move those forward. The sideboards were to identify something achievable in an 18 month window while also seeding activities to be continued into the future, and ensuring that each member must see themselves in at least one objective.

Patti Blankenship, NSC co-chair, reviewed the WFLC Priority Action Overview document. She explained that the objectives are based on what success would look like for the WFLC. The NSC want the objectives to be actionable. Tasks were suggestions for direction and to start discussion but were not intended to be all inclusive. The discussion began with the objectives mentioned by the co-chairs at the start of the day (which fell under Priority 1): environmental compliance and smoke / air quality.

Priority 1: focus on smoke/air quality and environmental compliance

WFLC members unanimously decided to address smoke and air quality. Several key discussion points arose around the issue of environmental compliance. The members clarified that they did not intend to tackle NEPA head on but rather that they wanted to make environmental compliance more efficient on the ground. The group decided that the best way to work on this issue was through shared learning on the ground and across different landscapes through actions that could be achieved in 18 months.

Using the NSC document, the WFLC decided that objectives under Priority 1 were for:

- Improving efficiencies and efficacy of environmental compliance: The NSC to convene a multi-agency group to evaluate and recommend ways to work collaboratively on federal government regulatory processes (including but not limited to NEPA, ESA, etc.), with the aim of developing a set of shared best management practices. (They decided “Outcome 1” in the NSC document and how best to do shared learning would come later)
- Addressing smoke and air quality: Here the group decided to go beyond shared learning to improving the opportunities for addressing unintended consequences at the intersection of fire management and air quality, as well as getting communities on board for fire mitigation tasks. The text in the NSC document around this objective reads: “Smoke/Ozone issues with EPA – Create a forum with state air quality regulators, EPA, WFLC and other state partners to evaluate inconsistencies in implementation of air quality regulations and as an opportunity for consistent tracking of air quality, particularly for prescribed fire implementation. This would be tiered from the national level with national activities/discussions, down to the regional and state level.” The Executive Manager will facilitate this process.

Priority 2: Focus on fire adapted communities (FAC)

In general, everyone agreed with the short term objective (and tasks) offered in the NSC document. The members recognized that there are already a lot of good activities happening that the group is unaware of and the need to increase shared learning. One member explained that WFLC members know what’s going on in their own organizations and the innovative leaders in the FAC community know what each other are doing – the challenge is sharing those innovative ideas outside of individual agencies and communities. One of the NSC’s tasks could be to determine the important parameters, likelihood of success, resource dependency, and how far reaching the outcome. The focus should be building a necessary suite of enabling conditions for FAC. Finally, added fire mitigation underneath Priority 2.

Building on the Ashland Example: Landscape scale collaboratives

At the beginning of the discussion on Priority 3, one WFLC member suggested tabling priority 3 for now and that instead the WFLC should focus on seeding large landscape scale collaboratives. The group discussed where capacity building for collaboratives could fit – one option was underneath environmental compliance. Another discussion track followed putting sideboards around “landscapes” - including that landscapes should be defined by the communities involved (not the agencies) and that acres is only one way to define landscapes. Tasks discussed under large landscape collaboratives included (1) starting a data call and (2) sharing information. It was noted that the Department of Interior could take a deep dive on the sage grass steppe but the WFLC would focus on landscapes more broadly.

One member raised concern around ignoring Priority 3 and the group decided that it should be included in the other objectives identified but specifically the work under Priority 2 with FAC.

The co-chairs summarized the conversation stating that there was a clear path forward for smoke management / air quality – but that the other three to four objectives discussed would take more work and discussion including work by the Executive Manager, an interim call with the WFLC, and work within the NSC. The final objective areas included: smoke / air quality, environmental compliance, fire adapted communities, and large landscape scale collaboratives – with wildland fire response folded into all of them. The Executive Manager will work on framing these components in consultation with co-chairs, the WFLC, and the NSC.

Public Comment

Several members of the public spoke to the WFLC. Marty Main, private forester, discussed the need to (1) operate on the appropriate scale of reference and be successful at the smallest scale (2) ensure continuity and commitment overtime (3) address both social and technical issues and (4) articulate to the public about what we collectively lose if we don't do fire management.

Ann Walker, private consultant, emphasized the need for the WFLC to have consistent membership and tackle not just the low hanging fruit but also the heavy lift – and to structure meeting to get the significant actions accomplished rather than pushed to the end.

John O'Connor, OR Department Forestry, talked about (1) the FAC as both a local and a national issue (2) the need for smoke management from the top down and (3) the need to be consistent in messaging about actions.

Jim Erickson, Intertribal Timber Council, emphasized that the work is about the homeland – it's about the watershed not just the drinking water and the need for personal accountability and thinking about the question: What is our legacy?

Administrative Items

The next meeting of the WLFC may be moved to the week of November 9th. An interim call will be scheduled in mid-September to check-in with the NSC. Florida may be the option for the winter meeting.

Closeout

The co-chairs thanked the hosts of Ashland as well as the NSC for their hard work. They felt that good progress was made on where to focus objectives underneath the three priorities while recognizing that the Executive Manager, co-chairs, and NSC had more conversations to have. WLFC members mentioned the need to get to the meat of the topic at the beginning of the meeting and the need to reengage the Southeast and Northeast regions.