

Community Wildfire Protection Plans: Lessons Learned



Community Wildfire Protection Plans can effectively prioritize resources in reducing wildland fire risk and helping build resilient communities in a dynamic world. Due to inadequate guidance, inattention to detail, and competing priorities, the potential for these plans is not being realized. *Community Wildfire Protection Plans: Lessons Learned*, found in full at www.southernrockies.org/CWPP, details the problem and identifies solutions that various stakeholders can advance to ensure these important plans live up to their potential.

CWPP Overview

Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs) are fire risk reduction plans developed by local communities to prioritize hazardous fuel reduction treatments on both federal and non-federal land.

CWPPs can take a variety of forms, based on the needs of the people involved in their development, and can be as simple or complex as a community desires. The *minimum requirements* for a CWPP as described in the Healthy Forest Restoration Act are: 1) A CWPP must be **collaboratively developed** by local and state government representatives, in consultation with federal agencies and other interested parties; 2) A CWPP must **identify and prioritize** areas for **hazardous fuel reduction treatments** and recommend the types and methods of treatment to protect communities and essential infrastructure; and 3) A CWPP must recommend measures that homeowners and communities can take to **reduce the ignitability of structures** throughout the area addressed by the plan.

The process is intended to be open and collaborative, involving local and state officials, federal land managers, and the broad range of interested stakeholders.

The Southern Rockies Conservation Alliance

SRCA is a coalition of 26 conservation organizations in Colorado and Wyoming.

Since 2006, SRCA has been the only environmental group in the country to have dedicated full-time staff focused on partnering with local communities to develop community fire plans.

The report **Community Wildfire Protection Plans: Lessons Learned** is a summary of that experience.

Missed Opportunities

Descriptive rather than prescriptive in outlining the CWPP process, the Healthy Forests Restoration Act provides significant flexibility to communities to determine the content of their plans and the process they use to develop them. This flexibility is necessary to accommodate a wide variety of community capacities, risk profiles, and landscapes; however, it has resulted in community fire plans that, in many cases, do not effectively identify or prioritize fire risk reduction actions.

While Colorado enjoys tremendous and growing local engagement in fire risk reduction activities and is recognized nationally for a premium placed on collaboration, our review of over 70 CWPPs in Colorado suggests a few shortcomings of note in the CWPP process.

1. Non-specific projects

The value of a CWPP in reducing fire risk is directly proportional to the specificity of its recommended actions on federal and non-federal lands alike. By and large, in the plans we reviewed, *types* of risk reduction actions were generalized (e.g.: roadside thinning) rather than specific actions prioritized (e.g.: roadside thinning between mile marker 1 and 2 on county road 123). Further, rather than taking the opportunity to take a hard look at the applicability and adequacy of federal agency plans in progress, communities tended to accept carte blanche on-going federal projects.

2. Lack of WUI definitions

It is now widely accepted that focusing risk reduction treatments in the wildland-urban interface (WUI) is the surest way to safeguard communities from wildland fire. How the WUI is defined, accounting for local conditions, is critical in providing federal agencies direction in allocating scarce resources where they may do the most good. Few of the plans we reviewed defined a local WUI, remaining silent on the issue or defaulting instead to either the HFRA definition (up to 1 ½ miles from structures) or to the boundaries of the CWPP area, often a geographically broad fire protection district.

3. Aligning federal-land treatments with local priorities

At their best, CWPPs can and should facilitate the coordination of cross-jurisdictional risk reduction treatments, providing federal land managers with a roadmap for future project priorities on federal lands. This is not happening today. While there are notable successes to be sure, generally risk reduction project planning and implementation still occurs in two silos - federal and non-federal. Discussion and dialogue are on the increase, but meaningful coordination is not.

No single stakeholder is at fault and no one stakeholder can advance solutions solo. Improving the planning process and ultimately the fire risk reduction impact on the ground should be owned by all parties involved.



Solutions

There are a number of relatively easy steps that can be taken to begin to remedy these issues. We offer recommendations to all engaged participants in *Community Wildfire Protection Plans: Lessons Learned*.

In short, while the flexibility intended by HFRA is necessary to account for different needs in different places, CWPP standards are necessary to ensure that plans meet their potential. One core standard must address the need for plan specificity in defining and prioritizing actions on the ground. In their plans, communities ought to take a hard look at projects moving forward on federal lands and decide whether those projects meet the needs of the community; land managers likewise need to re-examine their staging of projects to account for newly identified community priorities.

All parties must provide for greater transparency in project implementation, clearly identifying where project priorities originate. Professional land managers must re-double their commitment to partnering with local communities in an open and collaborative process and ensure communities benefit from their consistent and continuous involvement. Finally, all stakeholders should embrace the fact that CWPPs are dynamic documents that need on-going refinement, updating, and action.

Wildland fire is inevitable across much of Colorado and the country. Community Wildfire Protection Plans continue to hold great promise as a vehicle to achieve fire-resilient communities in fire-dependant forests.