Communication Framework

to support implementation of the

National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy

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Photo credit: Wendy Fulks, The Nature Conservancy.

Fire Learning Network (FLN) sponsored Mexico-Texas prescribed fire learning exchange near Victoria, Texas, in 2009.

Communication Strategies
to support implementation of the

National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy
A National Cohesive Strategy Communication Framework

Purpose

The Communication Framework consists of four communication strategies.
The strategies guide the general direction of the National Communication Group's efforts supporting implementation of the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy (Cohesive Strategy). Communication action plans will be prepared as needed for each of the strategies. Communication action plans detail the tactics and actions that will be taken to implement the strategies. Each strategy is likely to have several different communication action plans.

Supporting Cohesive Strategy Implementation

The Cohesive Strategy will be implemented by many different fire and land management agencies, by a wide variety of stakeholder groups that are affected by wildland fire and fire management, and by local, often temporary groups. In order to achieve fire management on landscape scales as envisioned by the Cohesive Strategy, many stakeholders will need to collaborate and take joint actions. Seldom will one stakeholder be able to accomplish the desired outcomes acting alone.

Collaboration is the fundamental methodology by which the Cohesive Strategy will be implemented. Collaboration involves a number of stakeholders who usually begin with diverse perspectives, beliefs, and understandings of the situation.

In order for joint actions to take place, divergent perspectives, beliefs, and understandings need to converge into shared understandings, perspectives, and beliefs. Mutual trust needs to be established and reinforced. A willingness to pool resources and authorities and take joint actions needs to develop. If the collaborators succeed in their joint actions and experience mutual benefits and satisfaction with the outcomes, the probability of future joint actions increases.

For convergence to occur resulting in shared perspectives, beliefs, understandings, and goals, a "continuous, rolling dialogue" must be established and maintained among collaborators. Communication strategies must support and encourage that dialogue. Awareness, information, knowledge, skills, motivation, recognition, and connectedness all support the dialogue.

Broad Guidance for the National Communication Group

The strategies described in this document guide the work of the National Communication Working Group. The strategies and tactics may serve as useful models for the Cohesive Strategy Regional groups and other stakeholder groups working on Cohesive Strategy communications. With that in mind, the Working Group will always strive to use communication science and proven professional practices to reach the Cohesive Strategy goals.

Photo credit: North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District.

The North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District, a member of the Fire-adapted Communities Learning Network, uses block parties to bring neighbors together for an afternoon of fire education in Incline Village, Nevada. Parties like these, which simultaneously build community capacity and deliver critical fire prevention and mitigation information, are an example of the strategies employed by fire-adapted communities around the country.

Desired Outcomes

Sponsors and stakeholders will continue to support the Cohesive Strategy and the level and extent of awareness and support will increase.

People and organizations typically face demands for their time and resources that exceed their capacity. Unless the Cohesive Strategy establishes itself as important and highly desirable, sponsors and stakeholders are unlikely to fund and implement programs and communication about the Cohesive Strategy.

The National Communication Working Group will elevate the Cohesive Strategy on the national public agenda when appropriate opportunities arise. Communicating success stories can create a bandwagon effect. Communicating success stories showing that many others with whom the sponsor or stakeholder identifies are engaged reinforces a desire to affiliate with the cause.

The numbers of stakeholders actively engaged in implementation of the Cohesive Strategy will increase.

Innovation diffusion and social marketing methods will be used to encourage more stakeholders and sponsors to engage in collaborative efforts to implement the Cohesive Strategy.

A high percentage of collaborative projects to implement the Cohesive Strategy will be successful.

Success stories will be gathered describing collaborative efforts to implement the Cohesive Strategy. These stories will be analyzed to determine themes common to success and the results communicated among sponsors and stakeholders through frequently published digests.

Knowledge utilization and technology transfer methods will be used to increase stakeholder capacity to collaborate and the knowledge and skills to do the actual work needed to create fire adapted communities, restore fire resilient landscapes, and respond more effectively to wildfire.

Stakeholders will adopt the Cohesive Strategy as a framework for organizing their approaches to wildland fire management.

Although fire's essential role in sustaining wildland ecosystems' abilities to provide essential ecosystem services has been long understood by scientists and land managers,

it is only now beginning to be appreciated by early adopters among the stakeholders and wider public. Public information and public education campaigns will seek to increase awareness of fire's role in wildland ecosystems and its contribution to the many benefits those wildland ecosystems provide to industry, agriculture, rural and urban communities, and the quality of life.

At the same time those campaigns will encourage communities to adapt to wildfire in their environments so that they can live safely and successfully with fire. Fire-adapted communities within fire resilient landscapes will be featured.

Both fire resilient landscapes and fire-adapted communities will continue to depend on a highly effective fire suppression system. Many fire suppression organizations, themselves, will need to broaden their missions to include fire education, fire prevention, hazard mitigation, community engagement, and other wildland fire management methods.

The misrepresentation of wildland fire, fire management, and fire suppression in the traditional and social media will need to be corrected or counteracted to the extent possible. Misunderstanding the roles of wildfire fire can make collaborative fire and land management more time consuming and difficult, and can also endanger human health and life.

Photo credit: The Watershed Center, Hayfork, CA.

Community members meet with firefighters to discuss a prescribed burn project. Using prescribed fire to reduce fuels in the wildland-urban interface mitigates wildfire hazards while building local cooperative fire management capacity, and building firefighter qualifications.

Guiding Principles

Base communications on communication sciences and proven professional practices.

Anticipate sponsor and stakeholder knowledge and information needs and meet those needs quickly.

Support the communication efforts of Regions and stakeholder groups to the extent possible.

Communication Strategies

Inform sponsors, stakeholders, and interested members of the public about the Cohesive Strategy itself, implementation efforts and programs, and successful implementation projects.

- Increase the number of people who are aware of the Cohesive Strategy and how it might affect their interests. It is particularly important that employees of the federal and state land and fire management organizations can clearly describe what the Cohesive Strategy is and what it means for what they do in their work. These employees are often an important and credible link between communities and the agencies.

- Sponsors want to know how their resources are accomplishing the outcomes that they value. Unless they are frequently reminded of this, they may redirect their support elsewhere.

- Frequently repeated evidence of success helps keep engaged stakeholders involved by confirming the wisdom of their decision to join the effort.

- Inspiring stories of successful collaborative projects will motivate others to undertake their own collaborative efforts to implement the Cohesive Strategy or join already active efforts.

Improve stakeholder ability to engage in collaborative efforts to implement the Cohesive Strategy. Promote knowledge utilization, technology transfer, and innovation diffusion. Document successes and determine common themes of successful projects. Maintain knowledge and information resources that are easily accessible to stakeholders (a national website and other social media resources).

- New and improved approaches will support Cohesive Strategy implementation. Monitor for and encourage the spread of new and effective ideas and applications generated in the field, scientific research results, and appropriate technologies.

- Sharing success stories helps others design and manage their own efforts. Identify themes common to successful projects using research results and assessments of success stories. Communicate those results among stakeholders and sponsors.

- Communication can be more useful and effective if best practices are employed. Use and model proven communication professional practices and communication research applications.

- Improve the national website to make it an easily accessible storehouse of useful information on Cohesive Strategy implementation. Make the site a portal to other websites and social media resources. Integrate the Regional websites and create a search system that allows users to find and access information on all the sites through any one of the sites.

Encourage and sustain a continuous, rolling dialogue among stakeholders about the Cohesive Strategy.

- Elevate the Cohesive Strategy on public agendas at appropriate times and places. A public agenda is the cluster of topics that are currently important topics of discussion in the community. The agenda determines not only what will be talked about but also what will be acted upon. When the Cohesive Strategy is high on the public agenda, plans and actions are more likely to happen.

- Communicate to the extent possible through established communication processes of the different stakeholder groups. Stakeholder groups have created communication systems that effectively reach their members. Communication tends to be more effective when the audience is segmented into similar interests and needs and communications (messages, sources, channels, and feedback methods) are tailored specifically to them. Communicating through established stakeholder systems accomplishes audience segmentation for a large majority of people engaged in Cohesive Strategy implementation.

- Ensure communication exchange among the three regions and stakeholder organizations. Provide a way to share new perspectives and understandings across the different dialogues. While many different social systems can generate innovations, for those innovations to benefit the nation as a whole, it is necessary for them to be communicated to other communities-of-interest. Innovation diffusion, knowledge utilization, and technology transfer communication strategies can support the rapid spread of innovations and support their implementation where appropriate.

Systematically monitor communication efforts and adapt communications as needed.

- Rapidly identify and correct misinformation circulating among sponsors and stakeholders or appearing among the wider public. The original Cohesive Strategy messages are likely to be modified and elaborated as they are discussed in the many different stakeholder forums. This is desirable and fundamental to collaboration. However, occasionally inaccurate or false information is interjected. It is essential to quickly make corrections so that misinformation is not spread further.

- Determine if and how communication efforts are working and have led to the desired outcomes. Based on monitoring and evaluations, revise communication messages, channels, and methods as needed. When this is done, the benefits increase and costs decline compared to when evaluations are done only at the end of a project. Communication works best when an adaptive management approach is taken.

The National Communication Working Group

Photo credit: US Fire Learning Network.

A FireScape Monterey workshop to identify strategies. FireScape Monterey works collaboratively to promote resilient landscapes and protect lives and property from wildfire in the Northern Santa Lucia Mountains and the Monterey Coast, California.

Scope of responsibilities

The National Communication Working Group serves the information and communication needs of national level stakeholders and sponsors. The Group works to maintain a "continuous, rolling dialogue" among national level stakeholders and to elevate the Cohesive Strategy to the national public agenda. It also seeks to ensure that the "continuous, rolling dialogues" taking place within the regions and within stakeholder groups and communities-of-interest are shared with others. The Group also promotes and supports the use of communication science and best professional practices.

History of the Communication Framework

The Wildland Fire Executive Council (WFEC) designated an interagency communications group, with members from the Department of Interior, USDA Forest Service, the National Association of State Foresters and the International Association of Fire Chiefs to serve as the National Cohesive Strategy Communications Working group. A WFEC member served as a liaison to the group. The purpose of the working group was to develop a "unified communication guidance and direction" document. The National Communication Framework (November 2011) was developed to focus on the conclusion of Phase II and the implementation of a National Strategy. http://www.forestsandrangelands.gov/leadership/documents/wfec/meetings/04nov2011/comm_framework_presentation/cohesivestrategy_commplan_10212011.pdf

Relationship to Regional Committees

Each of the three Regional Committees has its own communication organization. The National Communication group focuses on national issues and opportunities while the Regional Committees focus on issues and opportunities in their areas. The three committees and the national group collaborate as equals to serve the communication needs of those who are working to implement the Cohesive Strategy.

Membership

One person is assigned to the National Group from the US Department of Interior, and one from the US Forest Service. The US Forest Service contributes another Communications specialist to assist. Other part-time resources are occasionally provided by the National Association of State Foresters and the International Association of Fire Chiefs.

Resources

Funding is arranged by the Wildland Fire Leadership Council (WFLC). The National Communication Group actively seeks volunteer contributions of time and other resources from stakeholders to assist with projects. It relies on agencies and stakeholders to communicate with sponsors.

References and Resources

Communications Resources and External Affairs Tools, Templates and Presentations are centrally gathered on www.forestsandrangelands.gov including regional and national information.

On the Cohesive Strategy main page you can:
- Find foundational documents used to construct a Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy
- Link to the science and analysis behind the Cohesive Strategy
- Access key messages, fact sheets, talking points, and presentations
- Learn more about Cohesive Strategy Regions
- View Partner Perspectives and Resources
- Read success stories
- Stay connected social media events
- Contact Us

Other great internet resources related to CS goals include:
- Fire and Landscapes – www.conservationgateway.org
- Community wildfire mitigation tools and resources – www.fireadapted.org
- Wildfire Response – www.nfpa.org

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