
“We’ve made huge improvements in how we address firefighter safety. It has been painfully slow, though. All things are doable over time; it’s just the speed of change that is difficult. We will change over time, but do we want to wait 20 years and sustain the 20 firefighter deaths per year and increasing public deaths?”

—Type 1 Incident Commander, Society Focus Group

A 10-year review of accidents and incidents within the USDA Forest Service wildland fire system.

USDA Forest Service photo by Jace Jacobs.
Abstract

This document seeks to describe the wildland fire system and culture within which U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service employees operate. To do so, this review presents a narrative of the Forest Service's wildland fire system based on the opinions, experiences, and perspectives of those who operate within it.

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Chapter 4. Clear, Stable, Long-Term Vision

“What is the objective? I haven’t been on a fire in years where I actually knew what success looked like.”

—Type 2 Incident Commander, Fatalities and Injuries Focus Group

Framing the Problem

The 2007–2016 metareview qualitative analysis found that focus group participants often described a longing for clarity in agency mission and purpose. This observation was confirmed during focus group discussions as participants discussed wide-ranging perspectives on what the agency’s mission was. Despite differing perspectives, what was common amongst these conversations was the question: “Are we talking about the agency’s vision or the fire organization’s vision, and are those visions compatible?” As focus group participants pointed out, the current Forest Service vision doesn’t even mention wildland fire. One participant, an assistant regional fire director, captured the impact this lack of clarity has on the field during the fatalities and injuries focus group, saying:

“The Forest Service mission, vision, and guiding principles don’t mention anything about fire, yet fire has $3.9 billion of a $6.1 billion budget.”

To put a finer point on the issue, perhaps the need is not so much for a vision specific to the fire program, but for an agency vision that includes how fire fits into the larger organization.

What Is the Vision?

While focus group participants agreed that a clear, stable, long-term vision for the agency was essential, three different perspectives about the agency’s current vision emerged during focus group conversations.

Perspective 1: The agency’s vision does not address the fire organization/there is no vision.

Some focus group participants expressed a frequent lack of clarity around leader’s intent and vision and asserted that no vision for the fire organization currently exists. In the fatalities and injuries focus group, one participant pointed out that the last large-scale visioning exercise for the Forest Service occurred in 1995. They also noted how much has changed since then. For instance, in 1995, fire expenditures accounted for just 16 percent of the overall Forest Service budget; today, fire expenditures account for well over half of the budget. Whatever the reason is for this dramatic organizational shift in funding, staffing, and operational parameters, it is a different world now and fire has become a much bigger part of the Forest Service’s management scope without a corresponding change in vision.

“How or why has fire come to be such a large part of the budget?” was, for many of the participants, a crucial question they felt could yield deeper insights concerning the need for a new agency vision. These same participants also recognized that while vision-related documents for the fire organization do exist, including the “Chief’s Annual Letter of Intent” and “This Is Who We Are,” they felt these documents were not adequate to the need; the
first provides only a short-term vision and the latter provides a vision not specific to the fire organization.

**Perspective 2: The fire organization has a clear vision.**

Other participants felt the agency's fire community does have a vision; however, they felt it has not been well communicated. In several focus group conversations, participants spent a good deal of time discussing how the lack of clear leader's intent inhibits the communication, collaboration, and execution of one clear vision. This led to the question, “If we have a vision, what is it?” The conversation circled around what agency documents provide vision until one participant, a regional fire director, spoke up during the society focus group to argue that in fact, the wildland fire community does have a vision:

> “First of all, there’s the Cohesive Strategy. I find it alarming that we’ve been in here for a couple of hours and nobody’s talked about it. Because that is the agreed interagency framework for talking about the Nation’s fire problem.”

**“A National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy,”** known simply as the Cohesive Strategy, presents an interagency vision of safely and effectively extinguishing fire when needed, using fire where allowable, and managing natural resources as a Nation to live with wildland fire. Participants whose work units have whole-heartedly adopted the Cohesive Strategy spoke of effective collaboration and planning. They’ve seen gains in communication and understanding amongst themselves and their partners and spoke of having a universally agreed upon vision for managing wildfire in their area. Often, these localized success stories use the strategy’s goals (creating resilient landscapes, working toward fire-adapted communities, and safe and effective wildfire response) to build a common path forward. However, participants did note, where extensive preplanning and collaboration with partners is not taking place, the Forest Service wildland fire system tends to default to “safe and effective” fire suppression in response to wildland fires.

While some participants spoke of success implementing the Cohesive Strategy, most did not. If the Cohesive Strategy is the shared vision for fire, why wasn’t it the first thing that came to mind when participants talked about these issues? Why was there still so much confusion and lack of clarity?

**Perspective 3: The fire organization has a vision, but we struggle to carry it out.**

> “It wasn’t because of a lack of asking the question. It was just that success didn’t exist in a form that everybody could agree on what success looked like.”

—Fire and Aviation Staff Officer, Fatalities and Injuries Focus Group

Some focus group participants suggested we do have a vision, many of whom pointed to the Cohesive Strategy or the Chief’s Letter of Intent, and it is communicated effectively, but the message is confounded by behavior—there is a gap between the organization’s stated vision and the way members of the organization carry out their work.

Focus group participants highlighted several system drivers and unintended consequences that serve to reinforce the status quo of focusing on suppression even though other goals, such as creating resilient landscapes and fire-adapted communities, have been identified. Some of
these system drivers, which are discussed in greater detail in other chapters of this review, include:

- A pay structure for firefighters that rewards long hours on the fireline (overtime pay) and exposure to risk (hazard pay).
- A funding structure that supports virtually unlimited suppression spending but only limited and carefully scrutinized hazard fuels reduction and prescribed fire spending.
- A management approach that, in response to socio-political pressures, prioritizes mitigating short-term risks associated with fire events over long-term risks of fuels accumulation.
- A bias toward managing for short-term risk based on perceived threats to career and reputation.

As several focus group participants pointed out, no one questions when a person chooses aggressive suppression; if something bad happens you’re off the hook because it’s wildfire and not within your control. But if you choose to manage a fire for other than full suppression to create more resilient landscapes and something goes wrong, your career could be in jeopardy. This begs the question, “How can the agency’s fire organization and its people fulfill the long-term vision when current policy serves as a barrier to its implementation?”

## It’s Not for Lack of Trying

There are, in fact, examples of Forest Service leadership working to communicate vision, provide leader’s intent, and solicit feedback from the field. In the 2015–2020 Strategic Plan, Chief Tidwell committed to communicating “a clear vision and clear direction to all employees.” The elements of this vision included: (1) sustain our Nation’s forests and grasslands, (2) deliver benefits to the public, (3) apply knowledge globally, and (4) excel as a high-performing agency.9

Chief Christiansen also described her vision for the agency’s fire organization clearly in her 2019 Chief’s Letter of Intent for Wildland Fire as she identified priority areas for the year. She reaffirmed the Forest Service’s commitment to the goals of the Cohesive Strategy and reiterated its vision. And there are numerous other examples. Yet, despite all this effort, the three distinct perspectives outlined in the last section still exist.

It’s hard to question the intent behind efforts to provide clarity about the agency’s vision, but are these efforts hitting the mark? Are they reaching and resonating with their intended audience? And if not, then why?

## Communicating Vision

The concept of “communication virga” describes one of the challenges the agency faces in communicating its vision internally. In this phenomenon, much like rain that never reaches the ground, information that originates up high, say at the Washington Office, fails to make it to the people in the field, dissipating as it makes its way down through the chain of command.
Communication Virga

A thick, black bank of clouds builds on the horizon. The cloud bank brings the promise of rain, and as it rolls in, expectant faces look to the sky for relief. The rain is falling, yet what looks like a life-giving shower is diminished to a couple drops, the precious moisture evaporating long before it reaches the ground: virga.

This phenomenon is common across the dry west in the summer and its equivalent, “communication virga,” is common in the Forest Service work environment. The result is a workforce left looking to the sky for rain in the form of information; they see it up there, but never feel more than a drop, forcing them to operate to the best of their ability with the limited information they have.

This breakdown in communication typically takes place in several different ways, according to participants. Sometimes it can be well-meaning supervisors who think their subordinates don’t need to know the information and filter it out. Often, they are correct; sometimes they are not.

At other times it can be information saturation; there just isn’t enough time in the day to read every message. Focus group participants felt the abundance of other information or noise in the system inhibits their ability to identify important new information. Often, messages are deleted prior to reading as part of the daily information triage that most, if not all, employees carry out. Based on arguments made in Peter Senge’s pivotal book on organizational learning, “The Fifth Discipline,” if something as important as vision is communicated via email and looks like just another short-term initiative amongst an abundance of other initiatives, it is very likely that most will overlook or ignore it.

“Are we overcommunicating? Is there too much communication, too much information out there that people are just tuning out?”

—Safety Officer, Communication and Work Environment Focus Group

Participants also noted that broad statements of vision and leader’s intent often get modified as they travel down the chain of command, at times looking nothing like the original when the information reaches the field level. Participants also speculated it is possible people receive the message, understand it, but don’t feel invested in it because they were not involved in developing the message. If a vision statement is developed by leadership with input from a few at the field level and then “educated” down to the rest, those not involved in the development may feel left out, resulting in a lack of buy-in or support for the vision.

The struggle with communicating vision is not unique to the Forest Service. Ken Wong, the president of Lenovo Asia Pacific, recently shared some insights he learned from his career in business: “After more than 20 years in business, I’ve come to realize that the communication of strategy is of equal importance to the development of the strategy.” He recognized a substantial imbalance between time spent creating the strategy compared to time spent
determining how best to communicate the strategy. “While they may have spent up to 6 months developing a strategy, sometimes they’d spend as little as 6 minutes considering how best to share it with the organization.”

While “This is Who We Are” was the result of more than 10 years of collaborative work, participants shared that the first they had heard of it was when the books showed up on their desk. How much time was spent developing the communication strategy for relating this huge effort? What are the corporate assumptions that drive our agency’s communication practices? As an agency, could we learn a lesson from Ken Wong and others in the private sector who realize the importance of devoting significant time, energy, and resources to developing a communication strategy for getting all significant messages, especially those related to vision, to the field?

“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

—attributed to George Bernard Shaw
Learning Challenge

Regardless of which of the three perspectives you hold (we don’t have a vision, we do have a vision, or we have a clear vision but we struggle to carry it out), you likely work for the Forest Service for deeply personal reasons. Something about this organization drew you to it. Gather your work group, watch the linked videos below, and discuss the following:

Watch the video “How Does the WHY Relate to Vision?” and then answer the following question:

Q What is your “why?” Why did you choose to work for the Forest Service? Share your “why” with your work group.

Watch the video “You Don’t Need to be a Visionary – It’s Fine to be a Follower” and then explore the following content and questions.

The four links listed below each communicate a vision for the future of the Forest Service in different ways. There are undoubtedly parts of these vision statements that will resonate with you and other parts that may not do so. As you review them, look for the statements that speak to you, or for something that connects to your unique ‘Why’ and paints a picture of the vision you hold that you are willing to tirelessly work towards.

Forest Service Vision
2015–2020 Strategic Plan

Cohesive Strategy
This is Who We Are

Q What are the elements of vision presented in these documents that resonate with you? How do they connect to the work you do? What is the idealized vision of the Forest Service you are committed to realizing and what does it look like when it has been achieved? Share your thoughts with your work group.

Q How can you help your coworkers carry out the elements of the Forest Service vision they believe in? Share your ideas with your work group.

“I don’t believe vision should be something that is ethereal. It shouldn’t be something that lives in our imaginations...I love the Declaration of Independence and it is written in such a perfect form too. It doesn’t start by complaining. It starts by idealizing. And then it gets into all of the things that are in the way of this ideal and that’s what we set out to overcome.”

—Simon Sinek, “You Don’t Need to be a Visionary – It’s Fine to be a Follower”

Watch the video “Vision Without Execution is Hallucination” and then ponder the following question:

Q What are underlying system drivers preventing you from realizing the elements of vision that resonated with you? What can you do about them? Does where you sit within the organization (field, line officer, Washington Office, etc.) affect what you can do? How so? Share your ideas with your work group.

Tell us about your experience participating in this challenge at this team learning link!
Endnotes


4 Public Law 107–203. 107th Congress. (24 July 2002


7 U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. 2015. The rising cost of wildfire operations: effects on the Forest Service’s non-fire work. 16 p.


