Identifying Strategies to Address Cross-Boundary Fire Risk Mitigation in Different Communities and Contexts
Improving Cross-Boundary Wildfire Collaboration: Strategies to Address Barriers and Align Objectives

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What kinds of investments can improve cross-boundary wildfire governance and collaboration so that wildfire risk can be addressed at landscape scales?

What strategies improve collaboration?

What can we learn from barriers?
From a **Governance** Perspective:

Governance:
- **Formal** and **informal** institutions and organizations and their actors
- Laws, rules, policies, as well as social norms, traditions, and taboos

Wildfire governance:
- Federal agencies (USFS, BLM, Park Service, BIA, etc.)
- State and County Agencies
- Tribes/Native Nations
- Local Entities such as fire districts, conservation districts, HOAs, etc.
- Private stakeholders
Governance is Context Dependent

- What works and what doesn’t is different in different places
- Just as biophysical characteristics are different, social conditions vary
  - “Social-ecological systems”

Investments are more successful when based on this context
Roadmap to the Presentation

Research Methods and Study Sites

Collaboration strategies need to fit the social-ecological context

Understanding barriers to provide insights into investments

Washington Office perspectives on the problem-investment nexus

Recommendations for addressing barriers and aligning objectives
Methods and Study Sites

20 interviews with stratified random sampling of identified members of a social network
- North-central Washington

42 in-depth semi-structured interviews in
- North-central Washington
- Wasatch Front in Utah

Document/Policy analysis
5 workshops in Washington and Utah

22 in-depth semi-structured interviews with USFS Washington D.C. Office staff
Research Findings 1: Social Network Interviews

Collaboration strategies need to fit the social-ecological context
Social and Environmental Structures and Individual Agency

- Needs institutional support (job description, evaluations)
  but it also requires personal passion

  “it’s both. You can’t work outside your authority.
  And it has to be about [your personality]”

- Connections based on both professional and personal relationships
- Environmental conditions also effect collaboration
Self reflection is important

“So to me, that's collaboration right there, it's learning why they did that. And it was because we basically trained them to do that. So how do we gain that trust back?”
Social-Ecological Fit and Scale

- Collaborations are more successful when they focus on on-the-ground outcomes (not just the abstract concept of collaboration)

- Collaboration before/after a fire is very different than collaboration during a fire

“Before or after [a wildfire]... managing a forest, whether it's the Forest Service or [the state]... that operational mindset of ‘follow the rules, do what you're told, don't ask questions,’ [makes] collaboration very difficult. Ingenuity and creative thinking are very difficult because it's not in the box”

- Having collaborations and network connections in place prior to major fires (2013 – 2015) led to success
Social-Ecological Fit and Scale

- Collaboration transcends scales (not just local or regional)
- Collaboration versus “collaboration”

“we have to play the institutional game – and right now all of these collaborations... Forest Service people use ‘collaboration’ and ‘a collaborative.’ I'm talking about informal [collaboration]”
Please Share Your Thoughts in the Chat!

What are the best ways to make sure that collaboration is collaborative?
Research Findings 2: Cross-Boundary Governance Field-Level and Regional Interviews and Document Analysis

Understanding barriers to provide insights into investments
Barriers to Landscape-Scale Mitigation: How Understanding Barriers Provides Insight into Investments

Solution

Problem
The Usual Suspects: Commonly Cited Barrier to Landscape-Scale Mitigation

- Lack of resources
- Cumbersome planning processes
- Delays due to litigation
- Lack of public understanding
Solutions to Address *The Usual Suspects* Barriers

- Lack of resources → More money
- Cumbersome planning processes → Streamline NEPA
- Delays due to litigation → Limit litigation
- Lack of public understanding → Educate the public
Agency-Agency Relationships: Organizational Capacity to Work Across Boundaries

- Agencies have different missions and approaches

- Agencies lack capacity to navigate differences and build partnerships

- Staff turnover limits capacity and compromises partnerships
Solutions to Build *Agency-Agency Relationships*

Different missions and approaches ➔ Build capacity for dialogue and partnering

Lack of capacity to navigate differences and build partnerships ➔ Focus position descriptions and performance evaluations on collaboration

Staff turnover limits capacity and compromises partnerships ➔ Career ladders and promotional systems that reduce turnover
Engaging the Public: Connections Between Collaboration, Litigation, and NEPA

- Lack of early, meaningful public engagement
- Litigation is a symptom, not the problem
Solutions to Better Engage the Public

Lack of early, meaningful public engagement

- Invest in pre-NEPA public engagement and collaboration
- Increase collaborative capacity
- Go slow to go fast?
Research Findings 3: Interviews with USFS Washington Office Staff

Washington Office perspectives on the problem-investment nexus

*preliminary findings (data collection and analysis is ongoing)*
A Shared Understanding of the Problem

- To much emphasis on suppression
- Suppression overshadows fuel treatments
- More “good” fires need to burn
- Collaboration is critical to scale-up mitigation
- Investments at the local/community scale are needed
- Tribes are sovereign partners, but neglected partners

But there are important tensions related to how we invest limited resources
“Spreading the Peanut Butter Too Thin”

Limited resources spread over National Forest System

- Mitigation work is spread too thin to have an impact
- USFS staff are spread too thin to invest in collaboration

Focus limited resources on high-risk landscapes

*however:*

*Concentrating investments requires agreement about how we assess risk*

*AND*

*It would prioritize some collaborative efforts over others*
Tensions Around Collaboration: Go Slow or Go Fast?

Scaling up mitigation requires partnering with states, tribes, and communities, but collaboration takes time.

Examples:
- Prescribed fire and local tolerance for smoke
- Nation to nation partnerships with tribes

*Collaboration takes time but will it ultimately result in more mitigation work in the long run?*
Go Slow to Go Fast? Problem-Investment Assumptions

Assumption: Better/more collaboration will result in:

- Shared understanding of the problem and solutions
- More mitigation/more acres treated
- More “good” fire burning on the landscape

What’s the evidence?
Please Share Your Thoughts in the Chat!

What kinds of evidence would help us know if investments in collaboration are paying off?
What kinds of *investments* can *improve* cross-boundary wildfire governance and *collaboration* so that wildfire risk can be addressed at *landscape scales*?

Limited resources to invest, millions of acres to treat, lack clarity on prioritizing investments

Although collaboration is recognized as crucial to addressing wildfire risk

Collaboration is difficult, time-consuming, and not always prioritized/rewarded
Specific Recommendations (Align Objectives)

Focus on concrete, on-the-ground outcomes

Invest in collaboration pre-NEPA and pre-fire (and after)

Be willing to collaborate with partners before outcomes are known

Make achieving partner objectives one of your objectives
Specific Recommendations (Address Barriers)

Institutionalize collaboration:

- job descriptions/performance evaluations
- trainings
- reduce staff turnover through adjusting career ladders and promotional systems

Address barriers specific to the social-ecological context

Co-define what evidence or metrics will measure success
Thank you!

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