



Wildfire Crisis Strategy National Roundtable Summary

Leadership Panel Session: February 3, 2022
USDA Forest Service Employees Roundtable: February 4, 2022
Partners Roundtable: February 9, 2022

INTRODUCTION

The 2020–2021 wildfire seasons highlighted an incredible litany of challenges associated with keeping communities safe and resilient to the impacts of climate change and extreme weather events. This growing wildfire crisis has created the need for a new land management strategy within the USDA Forest Service—one designed to support strategic management and restoration of millions of acres of land in high-risk areas to protect forest health, watershed function, and human infrastructure. The need for increased pace and scale of restoration necessitates approaching challenges holistically and in partnership with employees, multiple agencies, Tribal Nations, state, and local governments, communities, industries, organizations, and private landowners.

In January 2022, the Forest Service released its [Confronting the Wildfire Crisis Strategy](#) and associated [Implementation Plan](#) (Plan). Under this Plan, the Forest Service will work with partners and interested publics to strategically focus fuels and forest health treatments at the scale of the problem, using the best available science as the guide.

The USDA Forest Service, with the support of the [National Forest Foundation](#), is hosting a series of [ten roundtable discussions](#) in the winter and spring of 2022 in support of the agency's effort to gain input on the Wildfire Crisis Implementation Plan. Planned roundtable conversations with employees and partners are the first of many coordinated engagement opportunities. A separate Tribal Roundtable has been planned by the [Intertribal Timber Council](#).



This report is a summary of key themes from the first roundtable in the series, focused on national-level partners and employees of the Forest Service.

ROUNDTABLE DESIGN AND PURPOSE

The goals of the roundtables are to

- Share information, goals, and timelines for the 10-Year Strategic Implementation Plan;
- Collect partner and employee input to inform the Plan;
- Provide an opportunity for dialogue among Forest Service leaders and partners to identify key needs and opportunities of the Plan; and
- Gauge ongoing levels of interest and determine ways to leverage that interest and energy.

Each roundtable includes three sessions: A two-hour Leadership Panel, during which a group of leaders frame the nature of the wildfire crisis, and two day-long sessions, one with Forest Service employees and one with partners, to offer feedback on the Wildfire Crisis Strategy and Implementation Plan. Please click to view the [agenda](#) and [presentation](#) shared at the National Roundtable.

In addition to the summary of themes provided in this summary, the notes captured during roundtable discussions are being shared with (1) appropriate internal agency teams and workgroups and (2) regional Forest Service leadership. Following the conclusion of all 10 regional roundtables, the National Forest Foundation will complete a synthesis report that highlights themes from all of the roundtables and recommends process-oriented next steps.

SUMMARY OF LEADERSHIP PANEL

Wildfire Crisis Strategy and Implementation Plan

USDA Forest Service Chief Randy Moore and Deputy Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment Meryl Harrell provided the foundational context for the National Roundtable, underscoring that we are [facing a mounting crisis](#). Wildfires on Tribal, federal, state, and private lands are growing in intensity and extent. Previously predictable seasons and patterns of wildfire are now increasingly unreliable in the face of changing climates and forest conditions.

An extensive body of fire and forest management science guides treatment for resilient forests. Of note, in the arid western United States, 80% of wildfire exposure occurs on less than 10% of forested lands. Nevertheless, the Forest Service and its partners are struggling to expand treatments at the pace and scale needed to make a meaningful reduction in fuel loads and improvement in forest health. A new paradigm is needed



among all partners and publics regarding the role of fire in public and wildlands management. Many have embraced this paradigm, with examples found in shared stewardship agreements with states and numerous cross-boundary partnership agreements with Tribal Nations, states, and local place-based collaborations.

Brian Ferebee, Chief Executive of Intergovernmental Relations, provided an overview of the Wildfire Risk Reduction Infrastructure Team (WRRIT) and its work. In January 2022, the WRRIT published an updated [10-Year Strategy](#) and [Implementation Plan](#). Broadly, the goals for the Strategy and the Plan are to:

- Identify the right locations and tools for fuels and forest health treatments;
- Develop needed workforce capacity and invest in enabling conditions;
- Work with partners across jurisdictions to develop and implement projects that are landscape scale, outcome-driven, and community ready; and
- Support planning and investments in fire-adapted communities.

The 10-Year Strategy establishes a target of treating 20 million acres of National Forest System lands for fuel reduction and resilience, with an additional 30 million acres treated on Tribal, state, and private lands over the next 10 years. The Strategy calls for the development of an additional plan to address ongoing maintenance needs beyond the 10 years. The Forest Service cannot achieve management and treatment objectives alone.

Responding to the wildfire crisis is a priority effort of the USDA and the Forest Service. The roundtables seek to engage partners and employees to identify smart, strategic solutions and approaches. The Strategy and Plan build on [more than two decades of focused planning and partnership](#) around the mounting wildfire crisis and seek to harness the collective energy, ideas, and capacities of the agency's workforce and external partners.

The initial timeline for the Strategy and Plan is as follows:

- 2022–2023: Plan development and early engagement
- 2024–2026: Ramp-up of plan, projects, and programs
- 2027–2031 and beyond: Sustain implementation and establish new norms of practice

A video recording of the Leadership Panel session [is available here](#). The panel comprised the following individuals:

- **Meryl Harrell**, Deputy Undersecretary of Agriculture for Natural Resources and Environment (NRE)
- **Randy Moore**, Chief, Forest Service
- **Angela Coleman**, Associate Chief, Forest Service
- **Brian Ferebee**, Chief Executive of Intergovernmental Relations, Forest Service
- **Jaelith Hall-Rivera**, Deputy Chief of State and Private Resources, Forest Service



- **Rachel Neuenfeldt**, Collaboration Specialist, Wildfire Risk Reduction Infrastructure Team (WRRIT), Forest Service

SUMMARY OF ROUNDTABLES

Themes from Breakout Sessions

In the employee and partner roundtable sessions, participants were invited to participate in three rounds of small-group discussions around five topics. These breakout discussions were designed to collect input for the Implementation Plan. In alignment with the key areas of work identified in the Strategy and Plan, breakout sessions were organized around the following discussion topics:

- Science supporting wildfire risk reduction
- Workforce and market capacity
- Outcome-based prioritization and metrics of progress
- Cross boundary partnerships
- Amplifying efforts in equity and inclusion

Major themes from each breakout session are summarized by topic below.

Science Supporting Wildfire Risk Reduction

Roundtable participants discussed several questions about the availability and use of science to guide fuels treatment and forest restoration. Participants were encouraged to offer examples of the successful integration of Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge (ITEK) into planning, decision-making, and projects. All were invited to describe challenges and opportunities for sharing science across scales and jurisdictional boundaries for strategic forest and fuels management.

Social Science

- It is important to elevate and incorporate social sciences into decision-making and public and partner engagement.
- More information and research is needed to help land managers and decision makers understand the costs and benefits of treatment versus the costs of fire suppression and recovery.

Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge (ITEK)

- Examples of projects we can learn from regarding ITEK include:
 - [Emory Oak Collaborative Tribal Restoration Initiative](#)
 - [Western Klamath Restoration Partnership](#)
 - [White House Tribal Nations Summit](#)
- There is growing respect for the knowledge and experience of Indigenous land stewards; however, there is still much room for improving engagement with Tribal Nations. Look to the work of the [Indian Forest Management Assessment Team](#) for recommendations.



Information Sharing and Integration of Data

- Endeavor to utilize an all-government approach to data and resource sharing.
- Standardize data collection to better integrate local, regional, and national-scale datasets and models.
- Be transparent about science and how it is being used by sharing datasets and assumptions.

Data and Monitoring Gaps

- A consistent challenge will be to define restoration and landscape goals in the face of changing climates and major fire and disturbance events.
- Ecological services and values need to be better incorporated and represented in cost accounting of managing public lands for and with fire.
- There is a lack of focal-species monitoring due to a lack of resources.
- Greatly expanded post-fire monitoring is needed to guide land managers and decision makers in the future.
- More, and more detailed, information is needed on the impacts of smoke and wildfire on vulnerable communities.
- An overall challenge is the lack of consistency in the format, collection, and integration of local, regional, and national information on wildfire.

Outcome-Based Prioritization and Metrics of Progress

During the kickoff session, the Leadership Panel described an ongoing challenge: the lands with the greatest need are not treated for fuels reduction; rather, lands that are accessible and available for treatment receive projects. Therefore, participants were invited to discuss more effective and efficient ways to work across boundaries to prioritize and treat the areas that would result in the greatest reduction in risk of catastrophic wildfires. Participants were also encouraged to offer examples and models for monitoring treatment for lessons learned and to maintain treatment goals.

Prioritization and Metrics

- A common theme is that there is a need for more and better information to “tell the story” of the urgency of the wildfire challenge, the need for partnerships, and guidance to prioritize action.
- A national “scaffolding” or framework that identifies critical corridors and regions would be an important foundation for partnership at the local level.
- Environmental justice criteria and information on impacted vulnerable communities should be included in prioritization frameworks and efforts.
- Drones are proving effective at gathering landscape-level data: expand the use!
- Some models for lessons in prioritization include the following:
 - Potential Operations Delineations (PODs)
 - Conservation Atlas
 - Forest Management Plans



Related Needs

- Participants from the private forest products sector requested greater engagement and partnership. Public and private sectors must work together to secure the necessary legislation and funding streams to reduce barriers and incentivize innovation and investment in new forest product infrastructure.
- Effective, collaborative prioritization requires more workforce capacity within the Forest Service. Current staff capacity is limited and hiring takes much too long.
- Long-term stewardship agreements, fewer restrictions on contracting, and proficiency of Forest Service staff in contract management all support effective work with partners.
- Environmental justice criteria and information on impacted vulnerable communities should be included in prioritization frameworks and efforts.
- At times, it will be important for the Forest Service to be a partner rather than the “center of the wheel” when it comes to prioritization and implementation. A cultural shift may be required for the Forest Service to proactively give up some control to local and regional leaders.

Cross-Boundary Partnerships

The questions guiding small group discussion regarding cross-boundary partnerships focused on the efficacy of different mechanisms and processes to integrate fuels treatment and forest restoration on National Forest, Tribal, and state and private lands.

Partnership Instruments

- Participants emphasized the need to improve the speed and frequency of partnership instruments to enable non-Forest Service partners to add capacity, innovate, and increase the scale of action. Partners are ready and willing to work in a variety of capacities. The same level of resource intensity applied in response to a wildfire should be used to improve the processes and practices of partnerships.
- Cancellation ceilings in stewardship contracts disincentivize infrastructure investment. A working capital fund is needed to support local industry if there is cancellation of long-term projects.
- Old models of partnership agreements take too long. Simplicity, efficiency, and predictability are the targets for agreements and contracts.
- It is natural for Forest Service staff to rely on and hold on to established processes and procedures, but this can inhibit innovation and partnership.

Building Partnership Skills and Capacities

- The Forest Service officers possess a wealth of technical skills and knowledge. Due to the complexity of changing behavior and policy, a Forest Service corps needs soft skills in communication and collaboration. Training and peer-to-peer education can be used to build capacity.
- The “strike team” approach is a way to bring knowledge from other places to local projects.



- Seek out those who are “bridge builders” and “connective tissue” and support, empower, and resource them to lead.
- The Forest Service can rely on partners to take on leadership roles.
- A comparison of priority treatment regions and capacity for local collaboratives may point to where to invest in seeding collaborative efforts.
- Due to the turnover of Forest Service staff, regions should invest in intermediary partners whose roles are to be keepers of relationships and recent history.
- After a fire, the social license is available to make progress, but how can we build and maintain this fast-fading support?
- Standard protocols for data collection and storage are needed to enable effective sharing.

Working with Tribes

- Relationships with Tribal Nations require specific attention.
- Often, Tribes are credited “on paper” as participating in stewardship agreements and collaboratives, but in many cases Tribal engagement is limited.
- There is still a need for a shift in perspective and language away from the concept of Tribal Nations as “partners” and instead as sovereign governments.
- Forest Service employees need more training on the Tribal Forest Protection Act.

Amplifying Efforts in Equity and Inclusion

Participants were asked to discuss who the underserved communities are that need to be included in fuels treatment planning and projects, what strategies are effective in engaging these communities, and how the Forest Service and partners can overcome the barriers to including the many cultures and communities that are dependent upon healthy forests and safety from wildfires.

Examples and Definitions

- The term “underserved communities” is commonly used, but specific understanding of who benefits and bears the cost of wildfire and recovery is critical.
- There are some examples of effective engagement with Tribal Nations in California on wildfire that may offer larger lessons.
 - [Forest Service and Tribal Partnerships in Northern California](#)

Barriers to Effectively Engaging the Underserved

- Technological access to grants and agreements, information, and tools
- Language
- Time constraints and availability of underserved community members

Keys to Success

- Process navigators are very effective in helping the underserved access tools and resources. Match local partners and leaders with Forest Service staff.
- Rely on partners and support them in leadership roles.
- Understand communication brokers such as Tribal fire resource crews.



- Diversify the Forest Service workforce by recruiting from underserved communities with competitive salaries and positions.
- Tell the story of the relationships between public health, fire, and impacts on underserved communities.
- Often, an effective strategy is to build on existing relationships and programs, such as the following:
 - Wildfire Adapted Communities
 - Center for Disease Control
 - National Association of Counties
 - USDA Rural Development Program

Workforce and Market Capacity

The Leadership Panel identified a critical set of challenges related to having adequate resources to collect and process fire fuels and forest products. For example, participants were invited to identify key workforce skills that are needed to accelerate treatment and different models for meeting these workforce needs within the Forest Service, and beyond, with expanded capacity among partners.

Another critical challenge identified is the lack of sufficient infrastructure to treat biomass and forest products, as well as the diminished markets that support the development of this infrastructure. Therefore, participants were invited to describe the state of the forest products markets and infrastructure and strategies that lead to a much greater ability to process fuels removed from forest lands.

Workforce Capacity

- The Forest Service needs to invest and build workforce capacity across the board in all skill sets: planning, “-ologists,” grants and agreements specialists, and many more.
- Overworked fire suppression groups need rest, mental and physical care, and work/life balance.
 - Suggestion: Host a conversation with this workforce to clarify key needs and priorities.
- There is a critical need for strong and clear leadership intent. Executive Officers need to support staff who take appropriate risks and are innovative with partnerships.
- We all need to message that wildfire is a tool and not just a crisis.
- Beware of “initiative fatigue” and general burnout among Forest Service staff.
- What bold moves can the Forest Service make to truly move the needle? Can resources be given to locals who lead and direct projects?
- Resource Assistants, Presidential Management Fellows, and other programs should be used in addition to traditional hiring practices to expand capacity.
- What are some innovative ways to get students into the workforce?



Market Capacity

- Need funding up front for market capacity development.
- The Forest Service can focus on playing catalytic roles through positions like contract specialists and NEPA and permitting facilitators so that partners are the doers.
- Must think holistically about capacity of trucking and transportation infrastructure, new timber and alternative forest product mills, etc.
- Shared storytelling is critical for increased buy-in to support new markets and infrastructure within the communities where they might exist.
- What does “getting to scale” actually look like? Need to tell this story in order to build alliances.
- This is a crisis. It might take fundamental shifts in roles, systems, procedures, and funding to make change.



APPENDIX A
Wildfire Crisis Strategy National Roundtable
Participating Partner Organizations

Approximately 75 partner representatives were invited by the Wildfire Risk Reduction Infrastructure Team to participate in this National Roundtable. A total of 43 partners attended this virtual event, held over Zoom. The participants represented a broad range of stakeholders and sectors.

American Forest Foundation	American Forest Resource Council
American Forests	Associated Oregon Loggers, Inc.
Blue Forest	Blue Forest Conservation
California Forestry Association	Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation
Confluence West	Council of Western State Foresters and Western Forestry Leadership Coalition
Defenders of Wildlife	Denver Water
Earthjustice	Federal Forest Resource Coalition
Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology	Forest Climate Working Group
Forest Resources Association	Hispanic Access Foundation
Idaho Forest Group	Intermountain Forest Association
Montana Logging Association	National Association of State Foresters
National Association of Counties	National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
National Wild Turkey Federation	Natural Resource Results
National Council for Air and Stream Improvement	National Ski Areas Association
Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation	Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition
Salt River Project	Sierra Club
The Nature Conservancy	The Pew Charitable Trusts
The Trust for Public Land	The Wilderness Society
The Wildlife Society	Western Environmental Law Center
Western Governors' Association	Wildland Fire Leadership Council

