



## **Wildfire Crisis Strategy Region 10 Roundtable Summary**

Leadership Panel Session: June 7, 2022

USDA Forest Service Employees and Partners Roundtable: June 8, 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](#), hosted 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. Roundtable conversations with employees and partners are the first of many coordinated engagement opportunities. A separate Tribal Roundtable was convened by the [Intertribal Timber Council](#).



## ROUNDTABLE DESIGN AND PURPOSE

The goals of the roundtables were 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.

The Alaska Region Roundtable included two sessions: a two-hour Leadership Panel, during which a group of leaders framed the nature of the wildfire crisis, and a day-long session with dialogue among Forest Service employees and partners to offer feedback on the Wildfire Crisis Strategy and Implementation Plan. Please click to view the [agenda](#) and [presentation](#) shared at the Region 10 roundtable.

In addition to the summary of themes provided in this report, 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 ten 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

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

- **Dave Schmid**, Regional Forester, Alaska Region, USDA Forest Service
- **Paul Anderson**, Director, Pacific Northwest Research Station, USDA Forest Service
- **Helge Eng**, Alaska State Forester
- **Charlie Sink**, Director, Trust and Land Management Division, Chugachmiut
- **Jason Kuiken**, Deputy, Wildfire Risk Reduction Infrastructure Team, USDA Forest Service

### **The Wildfire Crisis Strategy and Implementation Plan**

**Paul Anderson**, Director, Pacific Northwest Research Station, USDA Forest Service

The Forest Service's Confronting the Wildfire Crisis Strategy and associated Implementation Plan draws on decades of research that has shaped our understanding of fire and biophysical ecological, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts. The scientific knowledge, coupled with experiences of land managers and communities, is being used to inform decisions that focus on forest restoration and fuels mitigation treatments on portions of the landscape where they'll have the greatest impact on decreasing wildfire risk, particularly to people, communities, and natural resources.



The 10-year strategy is initially framed around delineation of firesheds, which are about 250,000 acres within these broader landscape areas. The fireshed delineations are areas within which fires can ignite and spread to communities. Using various modeling tools, firesheds have been assessed with respect to historical and predicted fire activity in relation to past, present, and planned management activities.

As a result, firesheds can be ranked according to wildfire risk to communities and resources, particularly the potential transfer of fire from wildland the buildings and community infrastructure. Such rankings can use to inform decisions around prioritizing cross-boundary investments of Forest Service and its partners for fuels reduction in forest restoration treatments. Additional research and analyses are underway that will allow consideration of potential wildfire effects on watershed functions, culturally important resources, critical wildlife habitat, and impacts to underserved communities, among other resource values at risk.

Throughout the implementation of the strategy, the Forest Service is committed to using a science-based approach, incorporating Indigenous and traditional ecological knowledge, investing in monitoring, and incorporating new information based on changing climate conditions and the landscape changes that arise from management, fire, community development, and other land uses.

Land managers can increase forest resilience and minimize wildfire impacts through forest management activities based on sound science. Hazardous fuels and forest health treatments that are being developed and encompass mechanical thinning, removal of trees from overstocked forests and prescribed burns. Introduced fire can be difficult to manage and requires adherence to a well-prepared prescription and execution by highly trained professionals to accomplish safely. It is imperative to use fire itself for fuel and forest management in our western landscapes. Fire is essential and is an effective fuel management treatment to reduce wildfire risk and can have ecological benefits for many forest types.

## **Wildfire in Alaska**

**Dave Schmid**, *Regional Forester, Alaska Region, USDA Forest Service*

There is a growing national wildfire crisis, which this [Strategy](#) and [Implementation Plan](#) seek to address. Early-season fires have already burned in the region, though partners did work to help contain it quickly. In 2019, the McKinley and Swan Lake fires occurred near vulnerable communities.

Climates and landscape conditions are changing quickly, and Alaska will need to expand its own resources and likely will need help from other regions. The fire season thus far in 2022 has demonstrated Alaska's need for assistance from those in the Lower 48. While the Lower 48 has access to a robust private sector to recruit and contribute to treatment capacity, Alaska does not.

The Forest Service in Alaska and all its partners must change management goals and strategies to address this new normal. These roundtables were an important way to collect thoughts and



ideas and to begin to build shared commitment for fuels treatment and restoration of healthy forests. A successful plan represents all voices and all communities.

Fortunately, decades of science and experience can guide the restoration of healthy, resilient, fire-adapted forests. However, it will take every tool in the toolbox to support our forests and our communities. This Strategy and Plan commits the Forest Service to work with Tribal Nations, scientists, state government, and private partners to implement this 10-year effort.

Research and monitoring confirm critical places to focus treatment in order to move the needle on fuels reduction. Only 10% of landscapes are responsible for 80% of wildfire exposure. The scenario investment plan, firehatched registry, and wildfire risk assessment are all tools that help prioritize fuels treatment. Treating the highest risk landscapes requires cross-boundary work and close collaboration.

Tools and models for funding and governance of cross-boundary work include Good Neighbor Authority, All Lands/All Hands, Shared Stewardship, and interagency agreements. Community wildfire protection grants are an opportunity and pool of resources backed by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. All land managers and communities must come together to define a common vision and goals.

### **Defining a vision for fire and landscapes in Alaska**

*Helge Eng, Alaska State Forester*

It is commonplace to say that Alaskan forests, landscapes, culture, and communities are unique—because they are! Alaska is what makes the United States an Arctic nation. The carbon stored in forests and permafrost makes Alaska important for global carbon management and climate change. So much of Alaska remains a frontier, and success will require that all partners focus on achievable future conditions.

The modest population of Alaska, 737,000 residents, is smaller than the city of Sacramento, CA, and all villages, towns, and communities are in the wildland urban interface. Alaska already faces challenges with maintaining its workforce, and fires that threaten or damage communities can have a great impact on the overall population and viability of Alaska.

To ensure that Region 10 and Alaska's forests not be left behind, it is important to consider funding allocations within the specific context of the region. Some of the criteria and values emphasized in the firehatched model and approach may not appropriately represent the need and challenges in Alaska. For example, the number of volunteer fire assessment grants in the region can help demonstrate the actual need and demand for resources in Alaska.

Alaska state government is working to do its part by allocating \$17 million from the general fund for buffers and firebreaks, beetle kill removal, and infrastructure and roads. Alaska Native Tribes and Alaska Native Corporations are leading the way on fuels treatment projects and would be able to treat more with improved contracting mechanisms with the Forest Service.



In addition, there is a temptation to treat the Chugach and Tongass National Forests as Pacific Northwest rainforests based on historical data of low fire return intervals. However, rapidly changing trends of desiccation and current science should guide planning and management efforts.

Forest management in the northern boreal forests is a national and global necessity and not a choice. If left alone to suffer degradation and increased thawing and wildfire, these forests could release countless tons of carbon into the atmosphere. Managing for fire requires simultaneous management for public health as well as resilient economies and ecosystems.

### **Working with Alaska Native Tribes and Alaska Native Corporations**

**Charlie Sink**, *Director, Trust and Land Management Division, Chugachmiut*

Chugachmiut is an Alaska Native 501(c)3 nonprofit Tribal consortium incorporated in 1974 to promote health, education, and training and provide technical assistance to seven Native communities of the Chugach Region.

The organization maintains a fire camp and houses a twenty-person wildland fire crew that maintains Type 2 initial attack qualifications, and a five-person project crew that will soon grow to 10 people. Chugachmiut started with a Type 1 hotshot training crew in 1998 with contracts under the US Bureau of Land Management. They became recognized as a Type 1 hotshot fire crew in 2001. That crew was not funded after 2008. In 2005, Chugachmiut started the Yukon fire crew as a Type 2 IA fire crew that exists today and fights wildland fire under a cooperative agreement with the State of Alaska.

Chugachmiut has a good working relationship with the Forest Service in Alaska and has entered into multiple agreements with the Chugach National Forest. Chugachmiut has an avenue for completing priority restoration projects on National Forest System land through a Good Neighbor Agreement with the Chugach National Forest. Chugachmiut has the distinction of having had the first Good Neighbor Authority Agreement in the nation with the Forest Service.

During the Swan Lake fires in 2019 that affected the Kenai Wildlife Refuge and Chugach National Forest, Chugachmiut participated in cooperative work with Alaska Fish and Game. They were able to obtain leveraged funding under the Pittman Robertson Act to match the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) funding that Chugachmiut had received. This funding helped create a fuel break that protected the wildland urban interface (WUI) near the Swan Lake fire where work was done on Fish and Game lands, Kenai Wildlife Refuge lands, and Native lands that helped protect residential areas, WUI areas, of Sterling, Alaska. This is an example of the collaborative work that originally was started by the "All Lands, All Hands" working group that began in 2002. The All Lands, All Hands Working Group evolved from the Kenai Peninsula Borough's Spruce Bark Beetle Program taskforce working group in 1998. In another treatment, Chugachmiut created a shaded fuel break for a Kenai Native Tribe graveyard site funded by the BIA.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), and Conservation



Stewardship Program (CSP) are all major funders of conservation work on Tribal lands in Alaska. It is critical that these programs remain accessible for work on Native-owned lands in Alaska. Chugachmiut also has a recognized certified NRCS forestry consultant on staff.

Chugachmiut recognizes that the Forest Service is a good partner and looks forward to working together in the future, using contracting vehicles that would work better for both Alaska Native entities that own land and the Forest Service.

## **SUMMARY OF ROUNDTABLES**

### **Themes from Breakout Sessions**

In the roundtable session, participants were invited to participate in two rounds of small-group discussions around five topics. These breakout discussions were designed to collect input on the Strategy and Implementation Plans. 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
- Outcome-based prioritization and metrics of progress
- Cross-boundary partnerships
- Workforce capacity
- Markets and industry

Equity and inclusion questions were integrated into each topic. 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 participants were invited to describe the challenges and opportunities they continue to face in sharing science across scales and jurisdictional boundaries for strategic forest and fuels management.

- Alaska hasn't traditionally suffered extreme wildfire events; however, climate change is causing conditions to change quickly, and there have been several big fires in recent years. It is important that Alaska look ahead and plan.
- Due to its size, location, and landscapes, Alaska will play a major role in the long-term picture of fire and climate change.
  - The temperate rainforests in southeast Alaska are sometimes referred as "the lungs of America" and are a large carbon sink.
  - At the same time, there is a risk of major carbon release as permafrost thaws in changing Arctic landscapes due to climate change.
- The fireshed model and concept is not especially useful for Region 10. While it offers some lessons for planning and prioritization, it is important to discuss fire and fuels management in the context of many other landscape and community values in Alaska.



- Alaska would benefit from a statewide look at the role of fire in healthy landscapes and in management. This is a complex issue for many reasons:
  - In terms of landscape health and community values, the role of fire, prescribed burning, and wildfires varies greatly across the state.
  - The scale of landscapes is giant, while the resources for stewardship, fuels treatment, and fire suppression are limited.
  - The National Forest System lands are important but small in area relative to the rest of Alaska. Tribes, state agencies, private industry, and communities would all need to take part in a statewide discussion about fire.
- Traditional knowledge is a deep resource but is often not utilized. Rather than seeking to extract knowledge or write summary reports on Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge and principles, all should strive to support face-to-face learning and shared stewardship.
- Alaska Native Corporations and entities would like to build capacity for fire, fuels, and restoration work. Handbooks, guidebooks, models, and templates for establishing teams and engaging partner agencies are welcome and needed. The Forest Service can help coordinate this effort of standing up local fire workforces.
- A continuous challenge is updating models and datasets. New technology is great, but there is a lot of work that needs to be done to store, manage, and integrate datasets and models.
- The Fairbanks office of the US National Weather Service excels in effective social media and public education efforts that tie complex principles to daily and weekly weather patterns. This can be a model and inspiration for effective communication by “focusing on the why” of fire-adapted landscapes.
- A goal for the Forest Service and partners is to be able to quantify and describe how fire and fuels management relate to other ecosystem, community, and land management goals and values. By linking fire to water, carbon, habitat, and resilience, land managers can guide more holistic and long-term management decisions.
- “Resilience” is often described as the goal or the target for management. This term has many meanings. Collaboratively built definitions of resilience and goals for landscapes are necessary for management across boundaries.

### **Outcome-Based Prioritization and Metrics of Progress**

Participants were invited to discuss more effective and efficient ways to work across boundaries to prioritize and treat the areas that will result in the greatest reduction in risk of catastrophic wildfires. Participants were also encouraged to offer examples and models for monitoring both to identify lessons and to maintain treatment goals.

- [Doyon](#), the Alaska Native Corporation for Interior Alaska, provides a model of working collaboratively on treatment plans and community wildfire protection plans. This is done with support from the University of Alaska, Fairbanks.
- A [wildfire hazard map](#) and geospatial data being developed at the University of Alaska, Anchorage, are valuable new resources for land managers.



- Light detection and ranging (LiDAR) and aerial imagery are very effective for rapid data collection on conditions but require dedicated resources for analysis, management, and updating.
- Potential operational delineations ([PODs](#)) is a useful prioritization tool.
- Prescribed fire requires careful cross-boundary coordination. Establishing local prescribed burn councils has proven effective across the country, including some successful models in Alaska.
- Shared stewardship agreements have not been utilized in Alaska to the extent they have in other regions. These tools can be better utilized.
- Prioritization would benefit from improved data and models on smoke impacts to health, economies, and ecosystems.
- In general, the Forest Service and partners need to coordinate on messages around risk and work collaboratively to define acceptable levels of risk when it comes to prescribed burning, letting some wildfires burn, and other fuels management decisions.
- In addition to metrics to monitor landscape health, it would be useful to develop metrics to track success of partnerships, agreements, and cross-boundary work.
- The city of Soldotna has some models of identifying critical infrastructure and including this in coordinated planning and funding efforts. Similar efforts should be made to include critical infrastructure in planning.

### **Cross-Boundary Partnerships**

With a rich history of collaborative stewardship, roundtable participants in the Alaska Region offered valuable feedback on the efficacy of different mechanisms and processes used to integrate fuels treatment and forest restoration on Tribal, National Forest System, state, and private lands.

- Given the scale of Alaskan landscapes, it makes sense to work together to address the highest risk areas. There are limited resources, so it's important to avoid bottlenecks. More cohesive, big-picture planning will lead to better outcomes.
- There are several mechanisms available for cross-boundary planning, including through State and Private Forestry, Community Wildfire Protection Plans, Firewise councils, and Shared Stewardship. The region has also seen some success directly engaging landowners in high-risk areas.
- In some instances, there are more funding options available than there is a workforce and infrastructure to implement fuels and restoration programs.
- [Kenai Peninsula All Lands/All Hands](#) is an example of effective cross-boundary coordination and planning. This project successfully shares resources across jurisdictions for fuels reduction, manages a range of interagency agreements and grants, and has enjoyed good communication among its members.
- [Chugachmiut](#) is a unique, valuable resource. Its programs and networks help deliver support to communities that don't have the capacity to support several municipal services. Chugachmiut can be an important partner in cross-boundary work.
- [Forest Inventory Analysis](#) (FIA) provides critical status and trend information to resource managers, policy makers, investors, and the public through a system of annual resource





inventory that covers both public and private land. This important resource requires continual updating and management.

- The Forest Service should invest in staff training around the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) and the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANSCA), what they mean for the authorities of Tribes and Alaska Native Corporations, and how the federal government can engage sovereign nations in collaborative land management.
- Staff turnover and rotations impede the Forest Service's ability to work effectively with Tribal Nations and Alaska Native Corporations.
- Effective cross-boundary work is built upon trust and relationships, which take time to establish. Dedicated staff, including those with collaboration and communication expertise, are needed for long-term success.
- Financial barriers to cross-boundary work include inconsistent and short-term funding, burdensome reporting and management workloads, and funding match requirements. All need to be improved to support collaborative efforts.
- Currently, many different agencies manage different mitigation grants for fire, flood, earthquakes, and storm events. An integrated center to access federal agencies for relief and restoration would be useful.
- Regulatory burdens limit windows for prescribed burning and restoration work. This includes National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) studies and the Endangered Species Act, particularly as it relates to migratory bird habitat. Can the Forest Service work with Tribal Nations and state partners to share some of the burden of environmental review and regulatory compliance?
- The Alaska Division of Forestry Stewardship Program is working to help stand up local fire crews and to network with local fire suppression resources.

### **Workforce Capacity**

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

- Most fire-vulnerable communities have limited capacity to stand up fire suppression and/or treatment crews. It will be important to build regional networks of practice and resources that can be shared and leveraged when needed.
- In addition to grants and program managers, the Forest Service and partners need expertise and materials to help communicate the science behind fuels risk reduction as well as costs and benefits.
- The city of Soldotna has some models for identifying and including critical infrastructure in coordinated planning and funding efforts. Similar efforts should be made across the region to include critical infrastructure in planning.
- In Alaska, outside of the Forest Service, there is considerable knowledge and experience held by Tribal Nations, private industry, landowners, and other agencies. However, it isn't necessarily easy to access and deploy this intellectual wealth. The Forest Service can



facilitate the development of networks of learning and practice to help meet workforce gaps.

- Some straightforward steps to making the most of current resources and expertise are to develop centralized, user-friendly tools for communication such as contact lists, network portals, and reference materials (templates, examples, etc.).
- Unlike other parts of the country, there may be enough seasonal separation that can be taken advantage of to train up crews for treatment as well as suppression.
- Work with students! Classes, events, and field trips as early as high school can help build interest and recruitment pipelines. Work with Alaska Native Corporations and Alaska schools and colleges to develop training programs in treatment and restoration.

### **Markets and Industry**

Another critical challenge identified is the lack of sufficient infrastructure to treat the by-products of restoration (e.g., small-diameter and commercial material, biomass), as well as the diminished markets that support the development of this infrastructure. Participants were invited to describe the state of the forest products markets and infrastructure across the region and identify strategies to increase the processing of fuels removed from forested lands.

- When it comes to developing private markets, big and small, the two national forests, Tongass and Chugach, are quite different and offer different forest products. This is both an opportunity and a challenge.
- Currently, most products coming from Alaska's National Forests are exported, but markets nationally and globally are not robust enough to absorb all the supply. Recently it has been less expensive to import fuel pellets, for example, than to source and sell them locally.
- There are currently few or no markets to address fuels reduction and the removal of non-commercial biomass in Alaska.
- A major challenge is where to develop infrastructure to process forest materials given the size and scale of Alaska and the remote nature of landscapes and communities. Mobile, small-scale solutions for things like fuel wood are places to start to develop markets for small-diameter timber and other nontraditional products.
- Despite a history of experimentation, biofuels products and markets are not establishing well in the region. When subsidies for pilot programs expire, generally these programs go away.
- Bark beetle spread is increasingly a challenge. Seek to learn from The Nature Conservancy efforts on beetle prevention and fuels reduction. Subsidies are needed to remove the increasing load of beetle-kill timber.
- International markets may have demand for black spruce.
- Work with Tribal Nations to explore opportunities to harvest trees for cultural practices, such as the construction of longhouses.
- Sustainable strategy grants and agreements through the Natural Resources Conservation Service and USDA Rural Development may offer funding and resources to seed markets and subsidize infrastructure.
- Road access and transportation costs remain difficult obstacles to expanding markets and industry.





**APPENDIX A**  
**Wildfire Crisis Strategy Region 10 Roundtable**  
**Participating Employee Units and Staff Areas**

The Alaska Region invited 33 employee representatives to participate in this roundtable. Approximately 19 employees attended this virtual event, held over Zoom. The participants represented a broad range of Forest Service units and programs/staff areas from across the region.

<b>Forest Service Unit</b>	<b>Staff Area or Program</b>
Alaska Regional Office	Deputy Regional Forester
Alaska Regional Office	Fire and Aviation Management
Alaska Regional Office	Fire/Fuels
Alaska Regional Office	Natural Resource
Alaska Regional Office	Public Affairs
Alaska Regional Office	Regional Forester
Alaska Regional Office	Regional Public Affairs Office
Alaska Regional Office	State and Private Forestry, Deputy Director
Alaska Regional Office	State and Private Forestry, Forest Health Protection
Chugach National Forest	Ecology, Botany, Invasive Species, Timber, Hazardous Fuels and Air
Chugach National Forest	Fire and Aviation Management
Chugach National Forest	Forest Supervisor
Pacific Northwest Research Station	Research and Development
Pacific Northwest Research Station	Station Director's Office
Pacific Northwest Research Station, Juneau Forestry Sciences Lab	Land and Watershed Management Program (LWM)
Tongass National Forest	District Ranger
Tongass National Forest	District Ranger
Tongass National Forest	Fire
Tongass National Forest	Forest Supervisor

**APPENDIX B**  
**Wildfire Crisis Strategy Region 10 Roundtable**  
**Participating Partner Organizations**

Region 10 invited 275 partner representatives to participate in this roundtable. Approximately 31 partners attended this virtual event. The participants represented a broad range of stakeholders and sectors in this region.

Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation
Alaska Department of Fish and Game
Alaska Department of Natural Resources, Forestry & Fire Protection
Alaska Fire Science Consortium
Aleut Real Estate
Anchorage Emergency Management
Bureau of Indian Affairs, Alaska Region
Bureau of Land Management, Alaska Fire Service
Calista Corporation
Chugach Regional Resources Commission
Chugachmiut
City of Bethel Fire Department
City of Dillingham Fire and Rescue
City of Houston, AK, Fire Department
City of Soldotna Economic Development and Planning
Doyon, Limited
Mat Su Borough
Municipality of Anchorage Office of Emergency Management
NANA Regional Corporation
National Weather Service
Salamatof Native Assoc., Inc.
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
Tlingit & Haida
US Fish and Wildlife Service, Alaska
US Fish and Wildlife Service, Interior AK