



**Synthesis of Wildfire Crisis Strategy Roundtables 2022
Overarching Themes and Opportunities for Action**

Executive Summary



**National Forest
Foundation**





Report compiled and produced by the National Forest Foundation August, 2022.

For more information, visit nationalforests.org/wildfire-roundtables.

The National Forest Foundation is grateful for the exceptional dedication and teamwork that contributed to ten successful roundtables. We extend our heartfelt appreciation to the many people within the Forest Service and beyond who helped to organize and facilitate these critically important dialogues. Last but not least, we offer a tremendous thank you all those who attended the roundtables as speakers and participants for sharing your ideas and time with us.

View the full report on the [National Forest Foundation website](https://nationalforests.org).



Photos left: National Forest Foundation, photos right: US Forest Service

Overview

Driven by overgrown forests, increased housing in forested areas, past management practices, and climate change, wildfires have grown increasingly large and intense in recent decades. The accelerating [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 people, critical infrastructure and property, and natural resources.

In January 2022, the Forest Service released its [Confronting the Wildfire Crisis Strategy](#) and associated [Implementation 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.

To collect partner and employee input on the Wildfire Crisis Strategy 10-year Implementation Plan, the Forest Service and [National Forest Foundation](#) hosted a series of [roundtable](#) discussions in the winter and spring of 2022. While underscoring the importance of efforts already underway to confront the wildfire crisis, the roundtables also highlighted institutional challenges that the agency must tackle concurrently as part of the Implementation Plan.

This synthesis document provides a synopsis of the wildfire crisis and outlines overarching themes and opportunities for action from across the ten roundtables. The ten themes are captured in brief in this executive summary and expanded upon in the full report.

Cover photo: National Forest Foundation



1. Embrace changes to Forest Service business practices and shifts in agency culture

Culture guides all actions, evolution will take time, and it all starts with leadership.

Key Messages from Roundtables

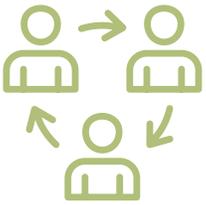
- A shift in agency culture is essential for change and progress on fire and fuels reduction. The Forest Service historically likes to take the lead. A new culture of humility, sharing authority and risk, and asking for help is necessary to address this crisis.
- Success is built on strong relationships. These take time and investment, and Forest Service structure, employee transitions, and cumbersome business practices can make long-term relationships difficult. Working with Tribes, states, and communities requires place-based knowledge and trust.
- Place-based collaboratives and partnerships offer opportunities for durable stewardship and innovation.
- Leaders must find ways to make room for line officers and supervisors to innovate and take strategic risks on projects, systems, staffing, funding, etc.

Opportunities for Action

- Utilize the trust and shared visions that are developed in place-based collaboratives to prioritize action and expedite implementation.
- Seed place-based collaboratives where they don't exist to begin relationship building and shared planning.
- Restructure the Forest Service to foster long-term relationships with Tribes, partners, and communities.
- Identify the types of programming, funding, and project decisions that can be made at the district and forest levels and empower line officers to take strategic risks.



US Forest Service



2. Improve internal and external communication related to the crisis and what is necessary for success



Above: US Forest Service

To convey the severity and urgency of the crisis and the need for policy and cultural change, connect fire and fuels to other multiple-use management goals and community values. Focus on the “why” behind this critical work.

Key Messages from Roundtables

- The Forest Service isn't always the most trusted messenger; partners can often play much stronger roles in communication with publics and landowners.
- Rather than seeking “social license” to proceed, build common visions and shared responsibility with communities.
- Develop clear messages and effective messengers to speak to complexity, uncertainty, and the evolving body of science around fuels treatment, climate change, resilience, and adaptive management.

Opportunities for Action

- Convene and participate in collaborative planning exercises that build cohesive, regional-scale visions, such as landscape-level restoration strategies, [Shared Stewardship](#) agreements, and State Forest Action Plans.
- Train staff in effective communication around risk, complexity, and the scientific method.
- Develop consistent and clear messages about wildfire risk and the benefits of fuels treatment and restoration.
- Humbly seek the most trusted communicators, even and especially those that are not within the Forest Service, and work with them to carry key messages.



National Interagency Fire Center



3. Recruit and maintain a workforce capable of meeting the necessary pace and scale of restoration

The Forest Service should focus on comprehensive workforce development, as it is perhaps the most critical limiting factor. Work to build capacity within and among partners rather than seeking to fill all needs through Forest Service positions.

Key Messages from Roundtables

- A limited and shrinking workforce within the Forest Service and among partners is a central, critical constraint on achieving treatment goals.
- The current workforce is overstressed, as are the communities in which they work. Workers forge on despite an accelerating crisis but cannot continue forever at this pace.
- All types of specialists are needed, including fire ecologists, contract and agreements administrators, collaborative professionals, and restoration workers.
- The restoration workforce needs competitive pay and benefits. Recruit workers in the communities where the work is needed.
- Historically high housing costs and low real estate inventory, particularly in the western regions, is a major challenge to recruitment and retention.
- Hiring systems, qualifications, position descriptions, and employment classifications are antiquated, cumbersome, and costly. For all employees, simpler hiring and recruitment tools are needed.

Opportunities for Action

- Update and improve recruitment and hiring systems for efficient administration by Forest Service staff, user friendliness for applicants, and timely hiring decisions.
- Update job qualifications and requirements to better describe staffing needs and to avoid precluding potential candidates, especially in underserved communities.
- Place a fire ecologist on each forest in the western regions as a resource for keeping projects and staff informed of the best available science.
- Invest in science communicators and partnership and collaboration professionals. These individuals bring specific skillsets and experiences that complement engineers, researchers, and land managers.
- Expand benefits, career paths, and compensation to be competitive with fire suppression and private industry in order to attract and retain quality staff.
- Work with colleges and universities to build pipelines of candidates that match workforce needs and to build interest and enthusiasm among youth to support land stewardship.
- Make the most of Tribal sovereignty, knowledge, and resources to increase the pace and scale of treatment and maximize use of available tools like the Tribal Forest Protection Act.
- Seek innovative, organization-wide solutions to housing shortages, such as building recreational vehicle infrastructure and cost- and space-efficient housing for Forest Service employees.



US Forest Service



4. Update partnership mechanisms and requirements for cross-boundary funding and implementation



National Forest Foundation

Updated mechanisms for funding, implementation, and governance of restoration activities across jurisdictions and land ownership types can offer meaningful advances in the near term. Start by reassessing funding match requirements.

Key Messages from Roundtables

- The Forest Service must simplify and redesign many of its procedures, systems, and requirements for grants, agreements, partnerships, and [Shared Stewardship](#). The Forest Service should actively engage with other agencies to develop solutions.
- Dedicated funding streams and workforce are necessary to meet the pace and scale of needed treatment and restoration. Currently, fire response draws on resources for increasingly longer seasons, so much so that all other forest and public lands management goals and programs are impacted.
- Match requirements within partnership agreements prevent participation and entrepreneurship from Tribal Nations and many local and regional partners.

Opportunities for Action

- Reduce or waive match requirements within partnership agreements to allow for greater participation by Tribal organizations, local jurisdictions, nonprofit organizations, and landowners.
- Hire and train more grants and agreements specialists, partnership coordinators, and contracting specialists.
- Work with the Department of Agriculture, the Office of Personnel Management, the Small Business Association, and other federal partners to expand and ease the use of mechanisms to fund work on lands outside the National Forest System.



5. Honor Tribal sovereignty and history; leverage learning, priorities, and capacity; and incorporate Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge (ITEK)

For meaningful and effective work with Tribes, approach planning of restoration activities with a respect for history, invest in long-term relationships, and co-lead projects from start to finish, rather than trying to extract “traditional knowledge.”

Key Messages from Roundtables

- All Tribes have a unique connection to and history with these lands, as well as diverse stewardship practices and knowledge. Effective coordination with Tribes requires respect of history and sovereignty.
- There are only a handful of examples of effective collaboration with Tribes and the integration of traditional knowledge and practices. These occurred when Tribes co-led goal setting, design, implementation, and learning.
- Opportunities under the [Tribal Forest Protection Act](#) are underutilized. Processes need simplification and Forest Service staff and Tribal counterparts need additional training.
- Remote meetings may not be an accessible or effective medium for working with Tribes and Tribal communities.

Opportunities for Action

- Recruit and hire from within Tribal communities.
- Train line officers in the administration of the Tribal Forest Protection Act to support Tribes as they lead fuels reduction and stewardship projects.
- Plan and implement projects with Tribes, starting with the development of common goals, and avoid trying to insert or append traditional knowledge to already-designed efforts.



Above: US Forest Service,
below: courtesy Karuk Tribe





6. Build equity and resilience into planning and implementation



The Forest Service and partners must intentionally invest the substantial resources and time required to engage and support underserved and hard-to-reach communities.



Themes from Roundtables

- Work collaboratively to include a range of values into the criteria that guide prioritization and planning for restoration, fuels treatment, and management, such as:
 - Fire risk reduction
 - Source-water protection
 - Habitat resilience
 - Recreation and public access
 - Local and regional economies
 - Underserved, vulnerable, and fire-impacted communities
 - Public health and water and air quality, both rural and urban
 - Protecting cultural and heritage resources
- Guide investments through a lens of equity and serving fire-vulnerable communities. Recruit workers and share leadership with Tribal and rural communities.
- The definitions of “underserved” and vulnerable communities are not well understood or consistently interpreted.



Opportunities for Action

- Clarify definitions of “underserved” communities and provide training and tools for line officers to identify and engage these communities. Assume that one size does not fit all and that all communities have unique histories, needs, and norms.
- Develop criteria and metrics for planning and prioritization that include fire-vulnerable and underserved communities for use in decision-support tools.

Top to bottom: US Forest Service, US Forest Service, National Forest Foundation



7. Expand markets and forest materials processing infrastructure



All photos: US Forest Service

Predictable volumes of source materials are necessary to incentivize sustained investment in forest product infrastructure. To treat and remove non-commercial biomass, reframe forest health as waste removal and carbon management.

Key Messages from Roundtables

- Reliable, predictable, long-term (10+ year) agreements and/or contracts are needed to spur investment and innovation in the private sector and to enable existing infrastructure to remain viable.
- Reframe the removal of non-commercial forest materials as waste removal and seek lessons and funding streams from that industry.
- In many cases, rural transportation infrastructure (e.g. roads and bridges) cannot currently handle heavy loads of wood products and biomass. Counties are critical partners and have resource needs to maintain county roads and systems.
- Experimental models of forest product processing infrastructure offer potential new and better ways to do business. Examples include “campuses” with multiple mill types or mobile mills that can reduce transportation costs and bring jobs and capital to communities. The private sector—producers big and small—can offer advice and leadership about how to expand markets.

Opportunities for Action

- Protect existing infrastructure by providing more predictable and guaranteed volumes of forest product materials for 10- and 20-year intervals.
- Incentivize investment in emerging and nontraditional products and markets with subsidies, particularly for small-scale and mobile infrastructure.
- Work with states and counties to secure funding to upgrade and maintain roads that can sustain the removal of heavy biomass and transport to processing infrastructure.
- Forge new partnerships with public health, emergency management, and defense agencies. Leverage private sector interests to gain access to carbon and waste removal models and markets.
- Seek entry to carbon markets as a revenue source and for partners in valuation of alternative forest products.



8. Build shared understanding and support for the use of fire as an essential tool for ecosystem resilience



US Forest Service

The country needs a public education campaign as effective as Smokey Bear to demonstrate the need for prescribed burning and the role of fire in healthy forests.

Key Messages from Roundtables

- Without more and longer windows available for prescribed burning, fire cannot be used as a treatment option for resilience and fuel reduction at the scale necessary to effect change. A complex set of obstacles must be overcome:
 - Fewer days and seasons available due to warmer and drier climates, eliminating most opportunities in the fall of each year
 - Environmental review, regulatory, and permitting delays and challenges
 - Public fear of wildfire and lack of understanding of the role of prescribed fire
 - Special use designations and restrictions
 - Treating overgrown forests on hard-to-reach landforms
- With some additional resources and capacity, the Southern Region can be a node for training and information sharing about implementing prescribed burns.

Opportunities for Action

- Create an ongoing public education campaign that explains the need for and benefits of prescribed burning.
- Work regionally with state agencies and legislatures to address issues of liability related to prescribed fire.
- Coordinate with health agencies to study and communicate the effects of smoke on community health and well-being, including best practices for mitigation and access to protections.



9. Invest in open and transparent information sharing and use of shared data and models

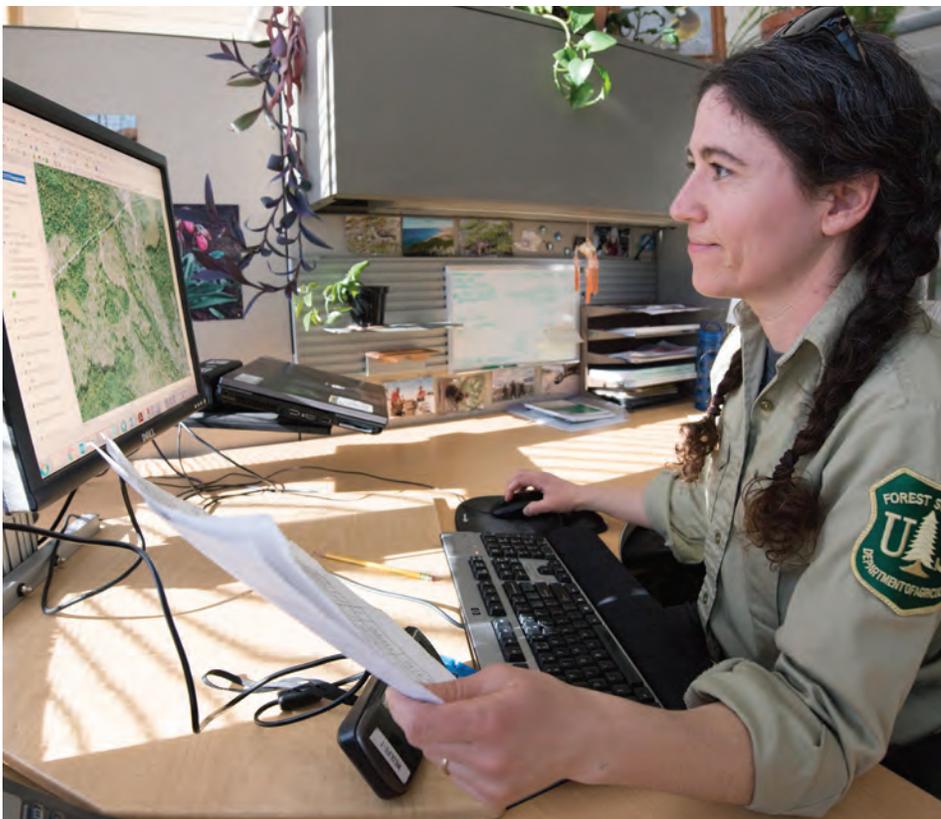
While it is not easy to continually update and synchronize datasets and decision-support tools, these actions can yield better consistency in prioritization efforts, levels of understanding, and approaches to fuels treatment and restoration.

Key Messages from Roundtables

- Regional- and national-scale models will be more effective with more precise and updated data about changing conditions on the ground.
- To plan local restoration projects that improve forest resilience, managers need access to regional and national models of how climate change will affect forest landscapes.
- Light detection and ranging (LiDAR) and drones offer much more efficient data collection but require staff and resources for analysis and storage. Partners offer expertise and capacity in the use and application of this technology.



US Forest Service



US Forest Service

Opportunities for Action

- Survey within the Forest Service and collate the range of models, decision-support tools, and datasets in different regions, forests, and research stations while striving for consistency in application.
- Develop platforms that allow partners to access and contribute to the ongoing maintenance and upkeep of data.
- Share models of successful projects, techniques, and approaches across Forest Service regions and with implementing partners.
- Align local and regional land management plans with Tribal, state, and county plans and initiatives.



10. Help decision makers and publics understand tradeoffs and benefits of management for forest resilience



National Forest Foundation

Invest in landscape monitoring and develop clear, accessible information regarding the benefits of fuel reduction treatment and associated costs.

Key Messages from Roundtables

- More monitoring of landscape conditions is needed before and after treatments and extreme fire events to help communities and decision makers understand the associated risks and benefits and develop best practices.
- There is a need for the translation of existing knowledge into accessible, effective messages and materials.
- Connecting fuel treatment and restoration management goals to public values of community, economic, and ecological health can help engage communities in forest resilience management to increase the understanding of its many benefits.

Opportunities for Action

- Invest in much more monitoring before, during, and after fire events to guide future treatment, update data/models, and effectively advocate for treatment resources.
- Quantify risks, impacts, and costs of prescribed fire smoke relative to extreme fire events.
- Work for greater transparency and accessibility to Forest Service and other scientific models and databases, including descriptions of inherent assumptions.
- Develop consistent and compelling messages and educational materials that help decision makers and publics understand the need for investments and close coordination on fuels reduction and fire-adapted forests and communities.