



## Assisting Low Capacity Communities Reduce Wildfire Risk: A briefing for states, tribes, counties, and communities June 2006



### Issue

Catastrophic wildfire impacts rural communities in close proximity to forest lands. Many of these rural communities, however, lack the resources to prepare for, respond to, and recover from a severe wildfire event. Efforts are needed to identify those communities with less capacity to protect themselves and to ensure that federal and state assistance is provided specifically to these low capacity/underserved communities. Incorporating social and economic information into planning processes at all levels (local, regional, and national) is a first step in identifying community capacity to address wildfire. Further, this information needs to be systematically integrated into decision-making and agency monitoring.

### Background and Overview

Wildfires and the related government roles and responsibilities for federal wildland management are prominent today because of the increased severity in the last decade of fires on and around public lands. In recent years, numerous laws, strategies, and implementation documents have been issued to direct federal efforts for wildfire prevention, firefighting, and recovery. Reliable national-level information and monitoring are essential to ensure good decision making, agency accountability, and to assist communities in reducing wildfire risk.

A 2005 study examining the relationship between wildfire and poverty used socioeconomic and ecological data to investigate whether communities most at risk from wildfire are able to access and benefit from federal programs established to serve these communities. In other words, are the dollars, assistance, and fuels-reduction projects hitting the ground in the areas throughout the country that are most at risk? Using the limited data that are currently available, this research focused primarily on the relationship between poverty and populated areas at risk to wildfire. The study resulted in a series of maps, illustrating the relationship between poverty, federal land ownership and WUI classification. This research is a first step to document the importance of social and economic information and community capacity in wildfire policy and implementation.

### What is Community Capacity?

A primary concern of the wildfire and poverty study was to understand the role of community capacity in determining community wildfire risk. We define community capacity in relation to wildfire as the collective ability of a community to mitigate wildfire threats, respond to active wildfire, and mitigate post-fire damage. Low capacity communities may have few internal resources available to prepare for and respond to crisis and change. Efforts that seek to provide community assistance may fail to succeed in low capacity communities because those communities may require different types of assistance.



Even programs specifically designed to reach underserved and low capacity communities often miss their target population because they fail to understand the dynamics at play in the community.

Understanding the capacity of a community to address the economic, social, and environmental costs of wildfire can lead to more directed policies and programs and a more efficient use of resources that may provide more appropriate assistance to low capacity communities. Capacity can be measured by many different factors, including income, poverty, housing cost, and other economic indicators. It can also be measured by the capabilities of a fire district (equipment, response time, or water supply), the organizational capacity of a community, citizen groups, or other stakeholders.

## Key Findings

- Information and data are lacking to determine which communities are at greatest risk (social and ecological) from catastrophic wildfire. Spatial data to inform every aspect of this research – including data regarding the ecological conditions of federal lands, wildfire protection capability in and around communities, and the federal expenditures under the national fire plan – are unavailable and/or inadequate.
- A higher percentage of poor households are located in areas that are not densely populated. Some definitions of at-risk communities and the Wildland Urban Interface are based on a population density that excludes many of these rural areas (which also correspond with high poverty areas). If funds are prioritized on the basis of population density, then many rural poor communities may be disadvantaged when it comes to obtaining resources for fire protection.
- The research also indicates that, in Washington (the one state we were able to obtain protection capability data), poor households are more likely in areas with low or no fire response capabilities than are non poor households.
- There is a relationship between poverty and federal land ownership, with more poor households located in close proximity to federal lands.

## Roles and Recommended Actions

The full report includes a series of recommendations to improve federal agency understanding and use of social and economic factors through national inventory and monitoring efforts, and to increase and improve assistance for low-income and low-capacity communities. Broad recommendations for all agencies to consider include:

- Use social, economic, and ecological indicators in assessments and decision-making. Identify opportunities to use indicators in assessments of communities at risk.
- Ensure that underserved communities are not excluded from the designation of Wildland Urban Interface areas. The definition of wildland urban interface in the Healthy Forests Restoration Act is based on population density and vegetated areas. Many low-income communities in the west are actually outside of that boundary and are classified as Wildland Intermix. While communities can self-define their wildland urban interface boundary through community wildfire protection plans, low



capacity and low-income communities may lack the capacity to engage in that kind of planning process. States have an opportunity to work with communities on local planning efforts and to clarify how the wildland urban interface is defined.

- Establish Performance Measures. Forestry agencies can establish and use performance measures in fire-related programs that strengthen monitoring efforts and focus on examining whether poor communities are benefiting from fire assistance programs.
- Develop and utilize a designation for low capacity communities. This designation will allow agencies to target direct assistance to communities that may need increased technical assistance.

Following are specific recommendations for state foresters, counties, tribes, federal agencies, and fire districts.

#### **State Forestry Agencies:**

- Integrate social, economic, ecological indicators within statewide assessments of communities at risk and when providing technical assistance to communities that are developing wildfire protection plans.
- In 2003, the National Association of State Foresters put forward guidance on identifying and prioritizing communities at risk to wildfire, which includes criteria on human and economic values as well as protection capability (measuring the capacity and resources to undertake fire prevention measures.) State foresters have an opportunity to include additional social and economic indicators in future assessments and updates of Communities at Risk at a statewide level.

#### **USDA Forest Service Regional Foresters and Bureau of Land Management State and Regional Directors:**

- Identify and utilize accomplishable performance measures that will help the agencies identify how programs are providing benefit to low-income and underserved communities.
- Utilize a designation for low capacity communities in determining cost-share requirements and priority criteria for grants through the National Fire Plan and other programs.
- Include social and economic indicators in federal programs such as Fire Planning Analysis (Phase 2 which focuses on fuels reduction planning) and LANDFIRE.

#### **Tribal Government and Bureau of Indian Affairs Regional Foresters:**

- Integrate social and economic indicators in risk assessment, project implementation and monitoring associated with Wildland Fire Prevention Plans and other tribal planning efforts.

#### **County and City Government Officials and Local Fire Chiefs:**

- Engage in a multi-agency partnership that includes state and federal land management agencies, as well as local social service agencies and community organizations in all aspects of community planning for wildfire.
- When conducting risk assessment, implementing fire plan tasks, or monitoring projects in your



community, use social and economic indicators to ensure that low-income and underserved community members are represented in wildfire risk reduction efforts.

**Low Capacity Communities:**

- Assess the full range of needs within your community, including fire protection, forest health, and economic development, as well as the populations at risk (low-income, elderly, disabled, minority, and others).
- Collaborate with local government, fire districts, and state forestry to develop and implement community wildfire protection plans based on community needs assessments and opportunities.

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