



National Association of  
Conservation Districts

# Forest Health and Wildfires: The Role of Conservation Districts

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# Forest Health and Wildfires: The Role of Conservation Districts

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The frequency and intensity of wildfires has increased across the United States almost like clockwork. In their wake, these fires leave deteriorated soils, increased flooding risk, unproductive forests, and communities forced to rebuild.

In 2016, following one of the worst wildfire seasons ever recorded, U.S. Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell said, “The job of fighting wildfires has become increasingly difficult due to the effects of climate change, chronic droughts, and development within wildland-urban interface areas.”

**“We must do what is necessary to ensure we have the resources to perform restoration and wildfire prevention work essential to keep our forests healthy.” – Tom Tidwell**

Knowing the best work is done locally, the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD), in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), conducted five forest health listening sessions across the western United States. The goal was to identify the top wildfire-related challenges districts face and the ways districts can help prevent and mitigate the effects of wildfire. The sessions were hosted in Spokane, Washington; Sacramento, California; Boise, Idaho; Reno, Nevada; and

Santa Fe, New Mexico during winter 2015 and spring 2016.

## Unmet Needs Spell Difficulty

In every listening session, district employees, partners, and agency representatives identified five needs for better wildfire management and mitigation in their communities. These needs, listed below, were identified as either wholly or partially unmet by session participants:

1. Actively managed state and federal forests
2. Adequate biomass capacity
3. Adequate invasive species and pest management
4. Greater access to education within wildland-urban interface (WUI) areas
5. Streamlined National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process

There was a consensus among the participants that due to limited federal and state funding for forest management and a lack of cross-agency collaboration, forest maintenance is not getting done on public lands. Many said forest thinning was crucial to reducing wildfire risk and protecting the overall health of public forests. Others said overstocking on public

lands made maintaining WUI areas – where managed private lands can abut public forests – more costly to maintain and more vulnerable to wildfire.

Participants also voiced their frustration with the country's depressed forest products industry and said local demand for biomass, dead timber, and compost for power generation isn't nearly robust enough.

The health of our nation's trees has taken on a renewed importance in light of recent historic drought. Stress, brought on by lack of water, makes trees more susceptible to pests and other insects. As trees become infected, the overall health of the forest declines, setting the stage for catastrophic wildfire.

Proper wildfire education has become increasingly important as more people leave the country's urban centers to build homes adjacent to public lands. "[The 2010 wildland-urban interface of the conterminous United States](#)," a scientific paper published in 2015, found that as the WUI continues to grow, the expense, risks, and difficulties associated with fighting wildfires increases. Today in the United States, 44 million homes – that's roughly one in every three residences nationwide – is located within WUI areas.

Conservation districts and other entities can't begin forest restoration efforts following a wildfire until they successfully complete the NEPA process. The NEPA process begins when a federal agency develops a proposal to take a major federal action ([40 CFR 1508.18](#)). The

environmental review under NEPA can yield different outcomes: a Categorical Exclusion determination (CATEX), an Environmental Assessment/Finding of No Significant Impact (EA/FONSI), or an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

Regardless of the outcome, the process takes time. Listening session attendees said having the ability to begin restoration efforts on day one was critical, and that streamlining the NEPA process would be an important step in allowing for more timely restoration efforts to take place following a wildfire.

## Conservation Districts Can Help

In each workshop, attendees were asked to come up with ways in which conservation districts could effectively engage in wildfire mitigation and prevention, forest management, and forest restoration. Based on their answers, two major themes were identified:

1. Conservation districts can educate landowners, communities, and agencies
2. Conservation districts can build relationships and create strong coalitions

With an estimated 80 percent of wildfires being human caused, education is extremely important. Among the top suggestions from participants on how best to educate landowners and other stakeholders about wildfire were: (1) conducting Firewise demonstrations, (2) educating community members about the spread of fire, (3) providing USFS and local

fire departments with maps of where WUI residents and access points are located, and (4) encouraging public forest managers to use multiple treatment methods across jurisdictions.

The nation's 3,000 conservation districts work with federal, state, tribal, and other local agencies to provide technical assistance to landowners and managers on a daily basis. They have the ability to lead education and outreach activities in their local community, and can also develop community wildfire protection plans (CWPP). In NACD's Sacramento workshop, Jerry Reioux of the California Association of Resource Conservation Districts said "healthy partnerships lead to a healthy forest."

Conservation districts are involved in a wide range of forestry activities, including non-industrial private forest management, wildfire prevention and fuels reduction, biomass production and utilization, forest pest management, wildlife habitat management, and urban forestry.

"America's conservation districts work with our partners in a number of ways to help reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire and to restore the landscape when fire does occur," NACD Immediate Past President Lee McDaniel said. "Wherever there is a need, you can count on districts to deliver."

As a result of their dependability, districts and their employees have built a foundation of mutual trust and respect with local landowners. This trust is particularly beneficial when entering into federal and state partnerships or

agreements in communities where some residents may be wary of state and federal involvement.

Conservation districts can help align agency missions with community visions. When agencies are looking at large-scale project implementation, conservation districts are able to drill down and identify best practices for smaller, site-specific project implementation. Conservation districts have the ability to serve as a clearinghouse for technical and financial assistance for landowners and as sponsors for financial aid such as the USDA's Watershed Restoration Program and other state and federal grant programs.

**"Fires can't be fought alone. Restoration efforts are better done as a team." – Jerry Reioux**

Through the development of partnerships (community, multi-party monitoring, forest plan outreach, interagency collaboration), conservation districts can work to establish cost-share programs to add and retain value for forest projects at the state and local level. Conservation districts can encourage landowners to participate in local land-use planning; and through partnerships, work to bring in federal and state funding for technical assistance on plan implementation.

## **Conservation District Successes**

In each session, conservation district representatives shared examples of how they have or are currently working to

educate or build partnerships around wildfire prevention and mitigation.

## CALIFORNIA

- **Placer Country Resource Conservation District** – Operates one of the state's most successful community chipper programs (processing roughly 4,000 tons a year). The district also works with landowners to meet defensible space requirements and provides an alternative to burning brush piles.

## COLORADO

- **White River Conservation District** – Conducted a joint study with Colorado State University on wood utilization to determine the recovery rate of mill stock from lodge pole pine timber killed by mountain pine beetle. The district plans to do an economic feasibility study, with the goal of encouraging industry and lessening the potential load vulnerable to fire.

## MONTANA

- **Judith Basin Conservation District** – Worked with several partners to host a wildfire workshop to educate central Montana residents on what to do if a wildfire strikes.

## NEW MEXICO

- **New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts (NMACD)** – Has a collaborative agreement with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in which NMACD allocates BLM funds to soil and water conservation districts.

The districts use state price agreements (i.e. standing contracts) to get the work done. BLM takes care of NEPA and other compliance work and NMACD helps with the project design and contracting, increasing the BLM's capacity for forest and woodlands restoration.

- **Restore New Mexico** – Is a collaborative restoration effort that spans multiple jurisdictions and ownerships including state, private, and public lands. Restore New Mexico works with local land managers, conservation districts, BLM, NRCS and USFS field staff, producers, conservationists, academics, and state officials. Since 2005, the initiative has conducted chemical, mechanical, and prescribed fire treatments on more than 3.3 million acres of public, private, and state lands.

## WASHINGTON

- **Spokane Conservation District** – Conducts Firewise workshops to educate property owners on the benefits of establishing defensible space and the need to make landscapes more resilient to fire.
- **Okanogan Conservation District** – Hosts several Firewise workshops and has helped to evaluate post-fire impacts to natural resources and agricultural producers affected by Type I fires in 2014 and 2015. The district is now distributing over \$2 million in cost-share funding to those directly affected by these fires to help

the landscape recover and sustain critical agricultural operations.

- **Cascadia Conservation District** – Has dedicated an entire [section](#) of its website to wildfire preparedness. It allows individuals to get wildfire tips, toolkits, post-fire guides, and to schedule a free wildfire risk assessment. The district also operates a free roving chipper program for Chelan County residents.

In addition to the above actions, many conservation districts also currently assist with direct, on-the-ground implementation of forest health activities such as pre-commercial thinning and other activities that remove or reduce combustible material from the landscape pre-fire and slope stabilization, removal of hazardous trees, and vegetation restoration post-fire.

**“Wherever there is a need, you can count on districts to deliver.”**

**– Lee McDaniel**

## **Good Neighbor Authority**

Congress initially approved the Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) in 2009 for projects within Colorado and Utah. In Colorado, GNA projects had an emphasis on fuels reduction. In Utah, GNA projects included timber sale preparation, burning assistance, and land rehabilitation.

The Agriculture Act of 2014 (commonly referred to as the 2014 Farm Bill) provided permanent authorization of the GNA and

expanded it to include all 50 states and U.S. territories. The GNA allows for the USFS and BLM to enter into cooperative agreements with states and other partners.

The GNA is a flexible management tool that with the help of collaborative partnerships enables the federal government to carry out watershed restoration and critical forest projects like fuels reduction. The authority also helps to alleviate jurisdictional limitations in areas with “checkerboard landownership” by allowing projects that cover federal, state, and/or private lands to go forward. This “boundary-less” work environment has helped to increase areas of defensible space and reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires.

## **Conclusions**

As each workshop wrapped up, the conversations focused on “what’s next” and “what can be done nationally.” Several conservation district representatives discussed their intent to pursue a collaborative, expedited NEPA process that would allow for quicker responses to wildfires. Other conservation district officials said they would explore whether their conservation district and others in their state could provide the local delivery system component for landscape-scale forestry initiatives. Some state associations raised the possibility of listing district employees by specific skills to assist districts impacted by wildfire. All agreed that it is important for all parties to understand that sometimes short-term disturbances are acceptable in order to achieve long-term restorations.

On reflection of the Boise workshop, Benjamin Kelly, executive director for the Idaho Association of Conservation Districts, said “The listening session opened up a great forum to identify priority forest health issues, challenges, and opportunities to bring forward to the national level.”

NACD will continue to encourage state and federal agencies to collaborate with conservation districts in planning for, and implementing, pre-, during, and post-wildfire activities. The association will also continue to advocate for a federal wildfire funding fix.

Since the workshops, NACD has continued to push for better agency communication and a wildfire funding fix in Congress. NACD believes it is critical that federal policies support the uninhibited flow of vital information between agencies and partners that will allow natural resource concerns to be addressed, private and public property protected, and all life, especially human, fully cared for.

Conservation districts might not be equipped to battle wildfires directly, but they can play a critical role in helping prevent them and limiting their impact. Fire suppression policies in the past have resulted in an excessive buildup of fuels, particularly in woody plant communities. Overstocked public forests increase the risk of wildfire damage to lives and property and create other environmental problems by reducing groundwater recharge and eliminating wildlife habitat, vegetative diversity, and grazing opportunities. Federal agencies should adopt policies and

**“The listening session opened up a great forum to identify priority forest health issues, challenges, and opportunities to bring forward to the national level.” – Benjamin Kelly**

programs that encourage appropriate brush management, including the use of controlled burning.

To increase the number of preventative projects undertaken, it is critical Congress changes the way wildfire suppression is funded. Because fire seasons have become longer and more destructive, to put out the fires, the Forest Service is forced to “borrow” funds from forest management programs. Ironically, these forest management programs support the very activities that help to reduce wildfire fuel on public lands. NACD fully supports:

1. Increased funding for wildfire prevention, management, and restoration of our public forests and rangelands
2. Legislation that expedites the NEPA process
3. Policies and budget proposals that allow for prescribed burning and silvicultural treatments
4. Increased pre- and post-fire grazing on at-risk public lands

Without a change in the funding process, no amount of innovative approaches by conservation districts or increases in the number of Good Neighbor Authority agreements will be able to provide the protection needed on the landscape.