



THE FOXFIRE PRESS

ISSUE 005
September 1, 2025

The Wildland Fire Workforce: What is the Demand?



OVERVIEW

Wildfire is a rapidly growing industry across the globe. More and more communities are waking up to threat lurking in their backyard. Catastrophic megafires in the last ten years has caused everyone to start paying attention, from local gatherings to the halls of Congress.



Josh Dean, Wildland Firefighter Type 1. Montana, 2021.

Yet wildfire is vastly misunderstood and communities everyone are struggling with the same question - what is the wildfire problem and how do we solve it?

The truth of the matter is that we cannot stop nature, given increases in extreme weather patterns and overloaded fuels that are ready to combust at any moment.

We *have* to stop thinking we can prevent wildfire, and start discussing the ways we can live with this new normal.

This issue of Foxfire WUI Press examines the current trends in the wildfire workforce. The purpose is to start providing communities and organizations with data and evidence for building robust, local wildfire divisions.

SUPPRESSION

Suppression covers career pathways associated with suppressing an active fire. Complaints about suppression are valid, but misunderstood. There are a lot of resources that go into setting up, running, maintaining and planning on wildfires.

Traditionally, these positions are reserved for state and federal agencies, along with cooperators and private contractors. It is important to note that private contractor resources are required to comply with state and federal agency requirements to be on the line.

Not much research has been conducted compares that volume of workforce in the private sector versus the public sector. It is seemingly harder given private jobs are not commonly posted on LinkedIn or another commonly-accessed job search site. Federal and state agencies post on LinkedIn and USAJobs. This study was based on a LinkedIn search for “wildfire.”

Despite a lack of research, anecdotal data suggests that there has been an increase in wildland-specific workforce moving into the private sector because the pay is better. For example, even with the permanent federal and state pay increases, the hourly rate for a Wildland Firefighter Type 2 (WFFT2), is still between \$16-18/hr. In the private sector, the average starting hourly rate is between \$25-27/hr.



During this past summer wildfire season (2025), Incident Management Teams (IMT) heavily favored cooperator resources over private contractors. This strategy was great for communities looking to build their wildfire response capacity, and it is a vital step towards building regional wildfire resiliency. However, cooperators do not always have the level of wildland-specific training as the private contractors. Had this approach been more balanced and thought out, it could have been a great opportunity to bring private and public resources together and start repairing those broken relationships. Instead, it appears to have created a larger division.

FUELS REDUCTION - FIELD OPERATIONS

Fuels reduction activities were divided into two categories: (1) Field Operations, and (2) Prevention/Preparedness. The rationale behind is they require two different skill sets. This section focuses on the workforce that reduces the fuel load in the field. It was also included with suppression because the credentials and certifications come mainly from the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG), and some from the National Fire Protection Agency (NFPA). Lastly, there has been an observable rise in hiring activities at the federal and state level for these positions in the past year.

The type of fuels reduction crew is dependent on the fuel model being reduced. Traditionally, when we think of wildfire, we think of heavily timbered mountain slopes. Yet, the Smokehouse Creek Fire (Texas, 2024) and the Marshall Fire (Colorado, 2021) have demonstrated the need for reduction treatments in the grass/shrub fuel model. Each model requires different approaches. However, fuels and shrubs models are easier to mitigate and can be done with city-owned equipment and labor.

The timber model is significantly harder to reduce for a variety of reasons. The most obvious is slope, topography and density. Not having an accurate grasp on density within the project area can lead to budget and time deficits on projects. One of the biggest issues is removing and disposing the biomass taken out of the forests. Slope and topography can complicate removal activities. For example, if trees need to be removed using a helicopter, then the cost per acre obviously increases significantly. Further, if the trees are not big enough to be taken to a saw mill then communities have to come up with creative ways to dispose of the materials.

The biggest incentive for increasing the fuels reduction workforce is cost efficiency. It is a lot cheaper for communities to be able to use in-house labor as opposed to having to hire outside contractors. Travel and per diem costs alone drive the budget up during implementation stages.



Fuels Reduction Project. Colorado, 2022.

THE DATA

Out of 309 jobs surveyed, Suppression/ Fuels Reduction - Field Operations accounted for 108 jobs, or 35% of the workforce demand.

Suppression/ Fuels Reduction - Field Operations

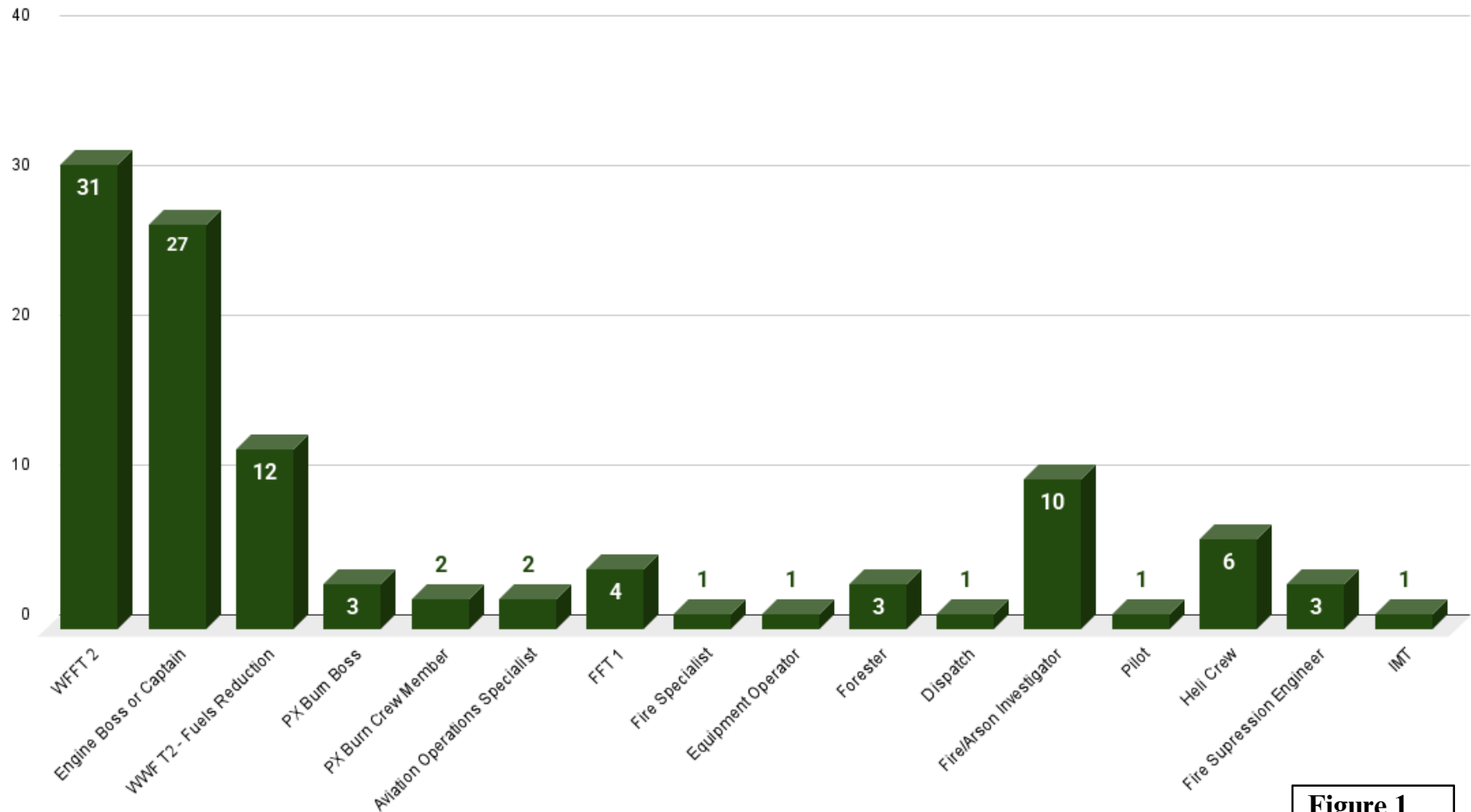


Figure 1

PROJECT MANAGEMENT & SUBJECT MATTER EXPERTS

The Planning/ Preparedness category consists of the current job demands pertaining to planning and prevention activities. Community Risk Reduction is becoming a more common-term that acts as an umbrella that covers multiple career pathways. For example, WUI Code/ Defensible Space Inspectors has been a steadily growing career pathway in California over the last two years.

When I joined my local volunteer fire department, I quickly became the “grant writer.” That position came with a multitude of responsibilities, including project management because we had a state-sponsored fuels reduction project that was actively being implemented. A year or so later, I was able to secure a FEMA Fire Safety & Prevention Project to continue fuels reduction and defensible space activities.

When I started writing wildfire grants for other communities, one of the things I always talked to clients about was project management. It’s an eligible line item in grant, so it should always be considered.

A similar trend has been emerging in the overall planning and preparedness workforce. Out of 309 jobs surveyed, Planning/Preparedness accounted for 144 jobs, or 47% of the workforce demand. Out of the 144 jobs, Project Management and Subject Matter Experts/Specialists represented 28 and 24 of those openings, respectively.

Subject Matter Experts often require intersectional knowledge and can be the hardest positions to fill. For example, the intersection of fire science, hydrology, weather and biology are growing areas that require a very specific skill set that is just hard to find because this industry has been so niche for the majority of its existence. Still, a further breakdown of the category revealed that “Mitigation Specialists” was the single highest category of available job openings.

It is also important to note that Remote Sensing analysts positions for one company represented 13 job openings. However, no salary information was provided for in any of the job descriptions.

THE DATA

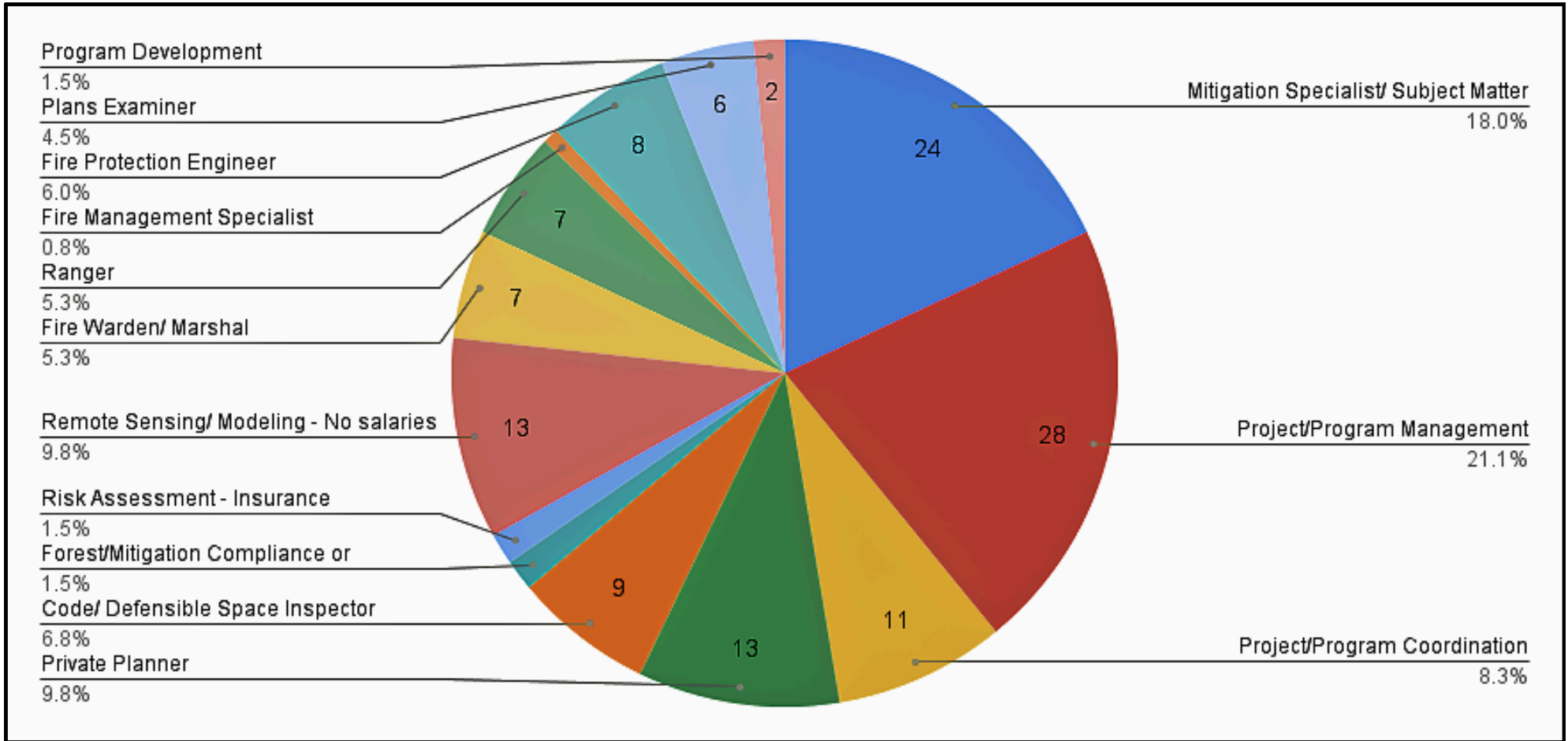
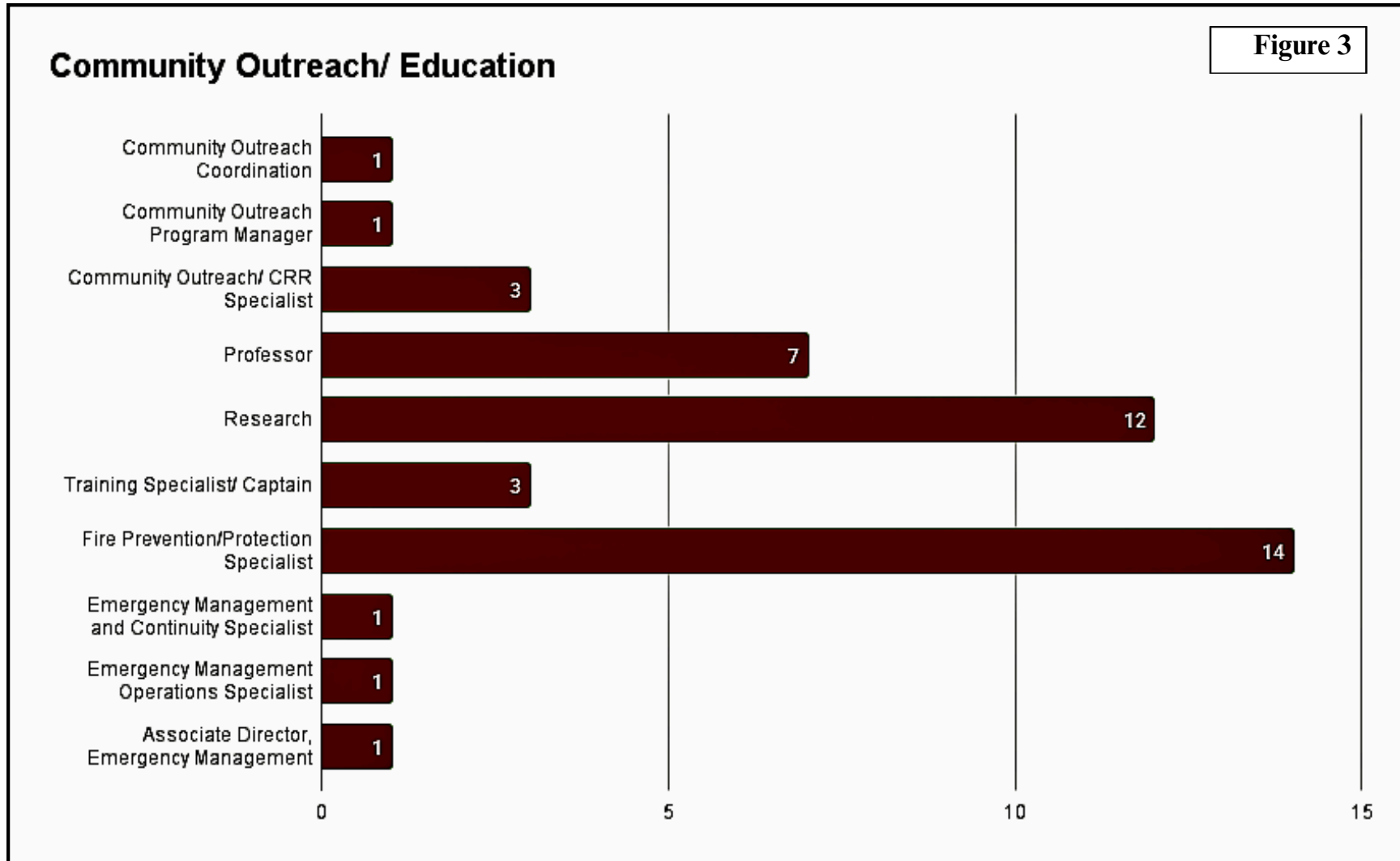


Figure 2

COMMUNITY OUTREACH AND EDUCATION

Community outreach and education is a growing sector of the wildfire industry, and will likely continue to grow over the next few years. The first two categories, combined, represented roughly 81% of the overall workforce demand. Community Outreach/Education was the third highest category, representing 44 jobs, or 14% of the workforce demand. These jobs were either tied to community-related projects, or were open positions with a university or school district.



MISCELLANEOUS

The remainder of the jobs surveys were tied to the private sector. Out of the remaining jobs, the utility sector had the most available openings. As the threat of wildfire continues to grow, especially given an aging grid infrastructure, more and more utility companies are developing comprehensive wildfire divisions.

Wildfire litigation attorneys and paralegals were not a largely represented category. However, this will be an interesting sector to keep an eye on in the upcoming years.