



What's the Plan?

A Guide to Understanding the Differences in Wildfire Planning and Purposes



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Overview

Wildfire planning documents are a hot commodity right now, and the demand is outpacing the supply. Assessing true wildfire risk, at a regional level, can be a very long and complicated process. There are many factors taken into consideration, such as weather data, topography, fuel loads, response capacity, social and cultural vulnerabilities, public knowledge and buy-in, etc.

There has been a significant rise in wildfire-related technology start-ups. However, there are still just a handful of companies that specialize solely in wildfire planning. Most wildfire plans have been completed by environmental and engineering firms, or conservation non-profits. I will not speculate as to why this is, but I assume it's because there just aren't very many people that are able to do this type of work right now. Technology is easier than human emotion. We are still developing the workforce, and planning requires thoughtful collaboration and intersectional dialogue between the prevention, planning and suppression communities.

This issue of Foxfire WUI Press is meant to help communities and organizations better differentiate between wildfire plans and how to select a plan that suits your unique needs. It also points out the need for expert-intervention during the early phases of the planning period. Budgets for planning documents are hard to accurately predict because of unforeseen challenges and obstacles that communities run into during implementation. This will provide a few recommendations for the planning process will maximize implementation efforts.





Purposes of Wildfire Plans

The purposes of wildfire plans align with the mission and objectives as wildfire risk reduction and preparedness. Ultimately, these plans help communities and organizations protect life, property, cultural and historical assets, economic/business continuity and effective recovery methods. More importantly, these plans are what allows communities and organizations to apply for federal and state funding assistance to implement recommendations and treatments outlined in the plans.

Generally speaking, most wildfire plans include:

- Defining the wildfire problem
- Identifying the areas that face the highest risk
- Extensive GIS mapping
- Fire behavior modeling and predictions
- Analysis of resource and response capacity for suppression
- Recommendations for areas to be treated
- Recommendations for methodology for treatment
- Public feedback and comment

Public feedback and comment is crucial to all planning documents. However, the level of engagement depends on the type of plan, and its purpose. As previously stated, this level of work requires a variety of skill sets and expert knowledge. That is why it is crucial clients understand the type of plan they need.

Types of Wildfire Plans

Currently, there are two types of wildfire plans:

- Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs)
- Wildfire Risk Assessment + Recommendations

CWPP's have a very specific set of requirements, state and federal regulations and policies that the document has to align with and abide by. They also involve more comprehensive collaboration amongst stakeholders and agencies.

Wildfire Risk Assessments are very generalized and can be catered to the needs of the client. They are better suited for private companies and organizations that are trying to protect assets.

CWPP's

Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPP's) are comprehensive planning documents that help communities plan and prepare for wildfires. As priorly stated, these plans require a lot of collaboration between local and state agencies, and various community stakeholders.

These documents are centered around defining the wildland urban interface (WUI), or areas where humans live with the wilderness. Historically, these areas are associated with log cabins and homes built in heavily timbered, more rugged mountain regions. However, recent incidents within the last five years, specifically the Palisade & Eaton, Palisade and Marshall Fires has caused us to redefine the way we classify the WUI. These fires have taught us that we have to start analyzing the wildfire risk for urban conflagrations and more densely populated areas.

Characteristics of a CWPP:

- More stringent requirements and activities for public engagement.
 - Including in-person meetings and events.
- Local and state agency collaboration.
- State/Federal agency sign-offs.
- Projects usually take longer because of requirements included.
- Usually funded by grants, although this is not always the case.
 - If they are state or federally funded they can come with comprehensive tracking, monitoring and reporting requirements that can be difficult to navigate without assistance or additional overhead support.

One of the biggest things to understand about CWPP's is that they are meant to protect residential communities, critical municipality and state infrastructure and assets, and provide recommendations to reduce the impact from a wind-driven megafire. They are not necessarily meant to protect non-residential assets.



Risk Assessments

Risk assessments serve as the umbrella that covers plans not specific to residential neighborhoods and/or whole-community planning. One of most important differences is that a risk assessments are focused on one or two geographic regions, whereas a CWPP is meant to assess multiple areas. Most CWPP's are written at a county-wide level, although more and more individual communities and municipalities are developing their own.

Risk assessments, similar to CWPP's, CAN be used to secure federal and/or state funding to reduce the wildfire risk. It still has to be signed off by appropriate agencies, but because it's an assessment and not a CWPP it does not have to follow such stringent guidelines and procedures. This can make the overall planning process much easier for organizations.

Both documents are meant to assess regional wildfire risk and provide recommendations for mitigation and treatment. They're ideal for nature conservancies and non-profits that are focused on protecting natural and environmental assets.

Common reasons for Risk Assessments:

1. Natural/ environmental protection
2. Post-wildfire environmental impact
3. Hydrological studies
4. Business continuity during active wildfire incidents
5. Private home/landowner assessments
6. Evacuation studies and plans

The City of El Cerrito (CA) had a comprehensive wildfire risk assessment completed on the Hillside Natural Area. The plan serves as a good example of what wildfire risk assessments can look like.

That document can be found at:

<https://www.elcerrito.gov/1650/Hillside-Natural-Area-Plan>

Recommendations

1 Identify your purpose for planning and objectives you want to accomplish.

Applying for state and federal funding assistance for wildfire prevention can be an overwhelming process. It is important to start with identifying the overall purpose for the plan. Is it to protect residential subdivision and critical infrastructure? If so, you are going to want a CWPP. Everything else could fall under the scope of an assessment.

2 Consider hiring a subject matter expert or meeting with a consultant prior to planning.

Wildfire prevention and preparedness has a lot of nuances and complexities that can create obstacles during the implementation phase of a project. It is highly recommended hiring an expert matter specialist to help develop the scope of a project and provide a more accurate budget.

They can also help develop projects and programs that are cost-effective and have long-term sustainability. There is a market right now for communities that can build robust wildfire prevention and response units.

3 Include a budget for community engagement and public outreach.

It is essential communities begin thinking about increasing line items and budgets for community engagement. Items such as food-trucks promotional flyers and giveaways are not always eligible expenses, or they can be capped. However, this is one area applicants can get creative with in-kind match requirements.

Wildfire can be a controversial topic. The antiquated town-hall meeting, accompanied by a power point, isn't getting communities any closer to reducing their wildfire risk.

Recommendations

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Include a budget for environmental and biological consultants and assessments.

- Biological and environmental assessments are typically not part of the CWPP unless they were included in the proposal or scope of work.
- Usually projects will require state and federal permits to be filed to begin fuels reduction work that involves mastication, heavy machinery, or removal of trees.
 - Example: A FEMA-funded fuels mitigation project in southern Colorado was restricted to September - March because of a protected avian nesting season. That did not mean the crew could not work outside of that window, but it required a biological assessment be conducted prior to work starting in a project area. This was not an expense the grantee had originally considered during the application window. It is important to understand what environmental requirements will be required for project implementation so communities and organizations so associated expenses can be included in project budgets.
- Biological and environmental assessments can be just as expensive as a wildfire risk assessment. It is important applicants understand what the requirements will be and how to incorporate line items into project budgets. The other recommendation would be to make it a separate project entirely.