

# Protecting Communities in a New Wildfire Reality

By Jennifer Coe

When I write this, it's September 2022 and western Washington is burning. An extended east wind event occurring over the second weekend of



September has caused the rapid western spread of wildfires burning in the Cascades and fueling new smaller ones throughout the lowlands. Evacuations have been ordered. Luckily, there have been no lives or structures taken from these fires so far, but we all know that with a simple shift of the wind that can change in a heartbeat. Air quality warnings have been issued across the region with recommendations to avoid outdoor activity, keep doors and windows closed, and use air filters on the worst days. While these conditions draw a swarm of media attention, it seems we are already starting to anticipate them every summer.

Despite the misnomer of being the "asbestos forest" our history shows that we can, and do, have damaging wildfires west of the Cascades. While our burn probability isn't very high, we must consider the dense population and amount of infrastructure that would be affected when we do have wildfires. We know that the environmental trends that support wildfire potential are increasing—warmer temperatures, less rain in summer, and earlier snowmelt = Drier Forests. (See <https://tinyurl.com/3bzcz7y2>)

Mix this scenario with an east wind event, an ignition source, and you've got the west slope of the Cascades recipe for wildfire spread and destruction. While we are recognizing western Washington's increasing wildfire risk, it is difficult to find national and state level data and maps that accurately illustrate this due to the low burn probability. This points to the need for more in-depth county-level analysis of risk in western Washington so we can better understand where our areas of higher risk are and determine priority mitigation actions.

## Bringing landscape-level and local wildfire risk

Community Wildfire Protection



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ALEXI GUDDAL

The Community Wildfire Defense Grant (CWDG) program will pay for projects identified in a Community Wildfire Protection Plan, such as community chipping projects like this one that was held in Skagit County. Partners for this project included the Washington Department of Natural Resources, the Conservation District, and neighborhood partners such as homeowners Sandy and Kathy McKean.



Plans (CWPP) are the main method for analyzing wildfire risk and prioritizing mitigation actions through a collaborative planning process at the county level. The framework for these plans came out of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) in 2004. The bare minimum requirements of a CWPP originally outlined in the HFRA include addressing structural ignitability, prioritizing fuel reduction, and collaboration with local and state governments in consultation with federal agencies. Three entities must agree on the contents including the local government, local fire departments, and the state entity responsible for forest management. Beyond these minimums, a community's planning process and projects can be whatever makes sense for that community.

Since 2004, many CWPPs have been written, and many have sat on a shelf and collected dust over the years. There are a multitude of reasons why this happens: lack of implementation funding, lack of staff capacity, or lack of community ownership, etc.

One of the most recent and exciting

opportunities that affects CWPPs is the Community Wildfire Defense Grant (CWDG) program. CWDG is a federal grant program intended to support at-risk local communities and Tribes with planning for and addressing the risks of wildfire. (For more information, visit <https://tinyurl.com/y926u753>.) Funding can pay for three types of activities: development of a CWPP or updating of a CWPP that's at least five years old, or implementing projects identified in a CWPP or wildfire section of a hazard mitigation plan that is less than 10 years old. With this grant, there will be \$160 million per year available over the next five years. Those eligible to apply for funding include local government, Tribes, nonprofit organizations (including homeowner associations), and state forestry agencies. In most cases, individual states' forestry agencies will be the lead entity on promoting this opportunity and serving as a pass-through for funds.

With this funding opportunity dangling big dollars in front of us, many—particularly those of us on the westside of the Cascades—are considering the

development of a county-level CWPP where there is none, as well as evaluating existing CWPPs to see if projects have been clearly identified in order to pursue implementation funding. This opportunity has also opened the door to exploring some CWPP suggested standard language that can be used to help ensure a more successful path to implementation. This language is currently in development; however, one suggestion includes linking to current and future smaller scale wildfire plans—whether it’s a neighborhood scale plan, a fire district plan, or neighborhood Firewise action plan. Doing so would allow certain actions identified within those plans to be eligible for CWDG implementation dollars. These dollars would support projects like hiring staff to educate residents on wildfire risk reduction actions, addressing public health issues around wildfire smoke, implementing fuels reduction projects, developing a chipping program, and purchasing mechanical equipment, to name a few.

### Writing a CWPP involves everyone

As emphasis gets put on counties developing, updating, and implementing CWPPs, it’s important to consider the wide range of stakeholders and partners that could and should be at the table during the planning process to help inform and prioritize actions. For example, local nonprofits often play an important role in the education and outreach aspect of wildfire risk reduction as well as facilitating the implementation of on-the-ground projects. Private forest landowners, and communities that own forest land play an important role in wildfire resilience, which means consulting foresters can be an invaluable asset to help them meet their forest management goals including forest health improvement and wildfire risk reduction. Recognizing the role and the value that you or your organization can bring to the table in addressing wildfire resilience will increase the capacity and efficacy of that plan. The more engaged communities are in the CWPP process, the more likely they’ll create community-based solutions that work.

### The future of CWPPs

As the years go by and our relationship

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## A CWPP on the Ground

The Skagit County CWPP (<https://tinyurl.com/mryh76pd>) is an example of a plan that continues to go through stages of reinvention based on new best practices learned, new research, and new opportunities. If you look at national level wildfire risk maps, Skagit County, up in the northwest portion of Washington State, doesn’t jump out with bright red polygons of extreme wildfire risk. However, if you zoom in and take a closer look at the soils, history, wildland-urban interface population, fuels, slopes, weather patterns, infrastructure, you’ll start to realize that Skagit County does in fact have areas of high wildfire risk. And, maybe even more important if you look at future projected changes to risk including the University of Washington’s Climate Mapper Tool (<https://climatetoolbox.org/tool/Climate-Mapper>) showing increase in high fire danger days through 2039, western Skagit County suddenly becomes an alarming bright red on the map.

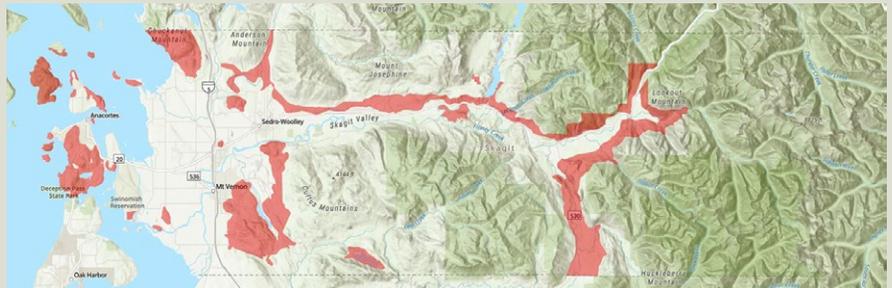


IMAGE COURTESY OF SKAGIT CONSERVATION DISTRICT (<https://tinyurl.com/43p36ph2>)

**When assessing the wildfire risk of a community, it’s important to not look strictly national-level risk but instead drill down to the community level. These are the areas of Skagit County that have high susceptibility to wildfire.**

The first CWPP for Skagit County was written in 2009. Despite good intentions, it mainly sat on a shelf and didn’t get much attention beyond the original authors. While some of the outreach and homeowner education around wildfire preparedness identified in the CWPP was getting done by the local Conservation District; no organized leadership or directive around accomplishing actions in the CWPP really existed.

In 2019 the Skagit Conservation District (CD) initiated and lead a rewrite of the CWPP and incorporated some newly understood best practices and new methodology for assessing wildfire risk at a county-scale (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ttV8JIILs>) that the CD’s forester had been developing and vetting over the previous year. One of the best practices suggested by FEMA that Skagit County implemented was to incorporate the CWPP into the County’s Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan, so it becomes part of the required five-year update schedule. Another best practice that Skagit used in their CWPP rewrite was including a section on monitoring and long-term success. Despite the improved plan that was created for Skagit County, there continues to be room for improvements and updates as new research and new opportunities arise, and as the landscape changes over time.

Since 2019 when Skagit’s CWPP was updated, new resources have come available that can improve the plan and inform the update process, like the Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network’s (FACNET) exploration of CWPPs (<https://tinyurl.com/y4tv8xps>) with diverse participants from around the country that focused on connecting practitioners, understanding current research, and exploring the next generation of CWPPs. Another “hot of the press” resource from FACNET is a tool to help communities identify and get started on their FAC activities. This FAC Pathways Tool (<https://tinyurl.com/5dvwx9z9>) can be used in the CWPP development process as it helps communities identify strategies that are tailored to their strengths and needs based on past successful practices in similar communities.

with wildfire and each other evolves, so do our CWPPs. We are evolving our CWPP language and best practices, discovering new partners, and learning new paths to success for implementation. While there will always be new tools and funding opportunities to take advantage of, the key thing to remember in the CWPP planning and implementation process is that the plan needs to work for and be tailored to the communities it is addressing. The CWPP planning

process, as described in the *Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network 2021* publication, “represents an opportunity for diverse community stakeholders to meaningfully engage in their local wildfire risk reduction actions” (<https://tinyurl.com/y4tv8xps>).

For those of us on the westside of the Cascades, we may not have as many wildfire disasters as our eastside counterparts, but it’s a great time to be proactive knowing that our risk is increasing. Given

the resources available, the next five years is an opportune time to be considering the development and implementation of a CWPP in your county. *WF*

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## A Successful Northwest Active Management Tour

By John Riling

This year’s Northwest Active Management Tour took place from October 7-9, 2022. The Active Management Tour started in 2016 and has taken the past couple years off due to the COVID-19 pandemic but came roaring back in 2022 with an exceptional tour of Oregon’s Blue Mountains. Forty-three attendees, most of whom were students from Grays Harbor College, Oregon State University, Utah State, and the University of Idaho, were hosted at Westminster Woods, in the heart of the Blues.

The event started with a tour of Woodgrain’s Pilot Rock Sawmill, where everyone received a warm welcome and engaging discussion about where Pilot Rock sources their wood products and key elements to their success, including the integration of technology and long-standing history the mill has in providing jobs and support to the community. The afternoon covered the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, including multiple stops showcasing enhancement of First Foods, wildfire risk reduction in the wildland urban interface, tethered, cut-to-length and ground-based logging, timber sale planning considerations on allotted reservations, and harvesting practices to encourage huckleberry production. In the evening, the forest supervisor from the Umatilla National Forest helped facilitate a campfire discussion on career paths for foresters entering the workforce, with perspectives from forestry professionals working in academia, city, state, private, and



The Northwest Active Management Tour highlighted forestry in northeast Oregon, with stops at Pilot Rock Sawmill, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, and Starkey Experimental Forest, the Umatilla National Forest, and Green Diamond Resource Company-managed property.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JOHN RILING

federal careers, each with an interesting story on how they got to where they are today.

The second day included stops on U.S. Forest Service dry and moist forest restoration sites, including management considerations along the Oregon trail and treatments for wildlife and old forest habitat. Lunch was provided at the Starkey Experimental Forest, where attendees learned about the largest ungulate research enclosure (25,000 acres) in the country, as well as management implications gleaned from over 80 studies and 350 scientific publications generated from the Experimental Forest. Saturday concluded with a visit to property managed by Green Diamond, highlighting their mission to manage private timberland sustainably and responsibly, spotlighting challenges they face managing forests in northeast Oregon. Following dinner, local logger Justin Wagner hosted a campfire conversation on his multi-generational family operation, sharing the joys and



challenges of owning a small logging operation in northeast Oregon.

Before folks departed on Sunday morning, an optional walking tour showcased ongoing harvest operations at Westminster Woods, highlighting consultation forestry, management plans, Oregon best management practices and small-scale private harvest operations.

This year’s tour was made possible thanks to exceptional support from the Blue Mountain Chapter of the Society of American Foresters and our sponsors who kept costs down for student attendance. Sponsors were Green Diamond Resource Company, American Forest Resource Council, Oregon Forest Resources Institute, Blue Mountain SAF Chapter, Oregon SAF, SAF Foresters Fund, University of Idaho, and Utah State University. *WF*