

Wildland Fire Leadership Council

Conference Call – VIA ZOOM

October 18, 2021. 1:00 pm – 4:00 pm EDT

CALL SUMMARY – via ZOOM

Council Members (Principals or alternates)

Rachael Taylor (DOI), Meryl Harrell (USDA), Robert Bonnie (USDA), Randy Moore (USFS), Michael Nedd (BLM), Cynthia Martinez (USFWS), Jennifer Flynn (NPS), Carla Clark (BIA), David Applegate (USGS), Tonya Hoover (US Fire Administration), Laura McCarthy (Gov. Lujan-Grisham – NGA), Matt Kingsley (NaCO), Vernon Stearns (ITC), Erik Litzenberg (IAFC), George Geissler (NASF), Brett Lacey (NLC), Troy Timmons (WGA), Ryan Orndorff (DOD), and Mike Zupko (WFLC Executive Director). RSC representatives, senior staff, and other interested participants were also on the call.

Meeting Objective: The meeting was focused on allowing the WFLC principals or their designated alternates to discuss and better understand the 2021 fire year, the Interagency Wildfire Resilience Working Group including its relation to WFLC, opportunities and challenges associated with currently pending legislation, and smoke management and air quality issues.

Opening Remarks – Chair, Meryl Harrell, Deputy Under Secretary, USDA, Robert Bonnie, Deputy Chief of Staff and Climate Advisor, USDA, Co-Chair, Rachael Taylor, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, DOI, Randy Moore, Forest Service Chief, USDA, and Executive Director, Mike Zupko, WFLC offered welcome remarks.

Roll Call of Principals/Alternates by organization – Mike Zupko, Executive Director, WFLC, conducted the roll-call for the principals for each organization represented.

Agenda Review and Call/Zoom process – Zupko briefly reviewed the agenda, the intent of the meeting to focus on the 2021 fire year, smoke management and the infrastructure and reconciliation bills, and gave a brief overview of how to use the Zoom technology to help in facilitation of presentations and discussions of the WFLC principals.

2021 Fire Year Status (Jeff Rupert-DOI and George Geissler-NASF)

Objective: Offer a review of the 2021 fire year to date so that all members have the same understanding of challenges and successes that have occurred.

Outcomes: Develop a collective understanding of the current impacts from 2021, key issues to consider, and expand opportunities for strategic coordination across the WFLC membership.

- Jeff Rupert, DOI, discussed the 2021 fire year. There were 99 consecutive days at PL 4 & 5. The most days at PL 4 and above ever recorded. Not seeing more acres burned or more fires however. Resource demand has been a challenge for this year which has driven the lengthy high preparedness level. Dixie fire is still not fully contained (963,000 acres; over 1,300 structures destroyed; 98 days and counting burning; largest single fire in CA history).
- Jake Nuttall, USDA, mentioned the acreage total burned were less than average, but the political opportunity and attention from the public is focused on the impacts seen in the WUI.

- Jeff Rupert noted the use of military and international resources. A LAT from Australia, resources from Mexico and Canada. Additionally, the most personnel deployed this year was 27,065 on 8/29.
- In July and August 2021 85% of western states were in severe and exceptional drought.
- The October- January fire outlook is showing southern CA not being high risk in December, which is good news.
- George Geissler, NASF, highlighted the interagency nature of fire response. 74% of the nation's wildfires have burned on state jurisdiction with state and local resources responding first. In addition to resource moved through the IROC system, states have utilized interstate compacts and state-to-state agreements to share both state and local ground and aviation resources. Many resources sent to the West from the South and Northeast. Concerns going forward are about resource availability, with a specific emphasis on succession planning. State and locals do not have the option to allow fire to serve a natural purpose due to suppression requirements. Given the 10 am rule mentioned by Chief Moore, managed fire is worth discussing going forward.

Smoke Management and Air Quality:

EPA Comparative Assessment on the Impacts of Prescribed Fire versus Wildfire (CAIF):

- Dr. Wayne Cascio, EPA, introduced the topic (**ATTACHMENT I**)
- Jason Sacks, EPA, discussed the overview and findings of the EPA Comparative Assessment on the Impacts of Prescribed Fire versus Wildfire.
 - Insights:
 - In the case study areas, predicted concentrations of PM_{2.5} from the modeled prescribed fires are smaller in magnitude and shorter in duration than wildfires, and the estimated aggregate population exposure for prescribed fires is smaller than for each hypothetical scenario and the actual fires in both case studies.
 - Well-designed prescribed fires targeted for specific locations may be able to reduce air quality and health impacts of subsequent wildfires.
 - Smoke impacts on health (i.e., cardiovascular and respiratory-related emergency department visits and mortality) are dependent upon population proximity to wildland fire events and meteorology (e.g. wind speed and direction).
 - Communicating the benefits of reducing wildland fire smoke exposure through individual actions and interventions (e.g., evacuation, air cleaners, filters for HVAC systems) that decrease PM_{2.5} exposures can contribute to decreasing the public health impacts attributed to wildland fire smoke if these actions are more widely used by the population.
 - The document was reformatted to two parts:
 - Part I: Conceptual Framework, Background, and Context
 - Part II: Quantitative Assessment of Smoke Impacts of Wildland Fire in Cast Study Areas
- Next Steps: Continuing this interagency effort with all partners and convene a workshop in the upcoming months which would discuss the research gaps. Strategically examine which questions should be addressed next. WFLC principals interested should let Mike Zupko know they want to participate.

CDC Health Impact Assessment:

- Dr. Pat Breyse, CDC, discussed the CDC Health Impact Assessment which aims to provide the final report in the summer of 2022. The hope is it will complement the EPA work done when examined together. Coordination with WFLC members going forward will be important.
- The aim is to quantify the health impacts of prescribed fire and wildfire.
 - Phase 1- conducting assessment of data sources; (current status)
 - Phase 2- smoke exposure assessments and health assessments;
 - Phase 3- comparative look at these assessments.

Dialogue:

- Chief Moore, USDA, asked what is the population exposure over time and when/where/how should we be looking at this. There is a big uncertainty on the longer-term impacts. The main focus thus far has been on the active immediate impacts versus repeated exposure from multiple events over years.
- Due to the increased growth in the WUI, there is an increased societal pressure around smoke. The ecological benefits in light of this- a systems approach is needed to look at this issue.
- Kinsley noted from the local level the ability to talk about the impact of prescribed fire smoke versus wildfire smoke will be important and could be incredibly effective.

Understanding the Interconnectedness of the Interagency Wildfire Resiliency Working Group and Relationship with WFLC:

(Taylor and Harrell)

Objective: Share administration Interagency Wildfire Resilience Working Group (IWG) structure and intent.

Outcomes: Understand the linkage between the WFLC's body of work and the IWG. Build opportunities to coordinate issues while maintaining appropriate foci in each group.

Harrel, USDA, discussed the Interagency Wildfire Resiliency Working Group. Some of the group's focus will be: implementing the cohesive strategy; coordination of interagency funding and resources; sharing data and science and expand the use of tools and technology; helping identify strategies for scientific decision-making on a large scale; identifying metrics for success measurement; and incorporating equity into wildfire investments. It aims to build off of and fully implement the Cohesive Strategy.

Taylor, DOI, discussed how this interagency group can complement the work of WFLC. This work requires all government- public health agencies and other agencies in addition to land management agencies. Performance metrics will be needed to tell the story of how we are working cross-boundary.

Co-chair Facilitated Dialogue: (Taylor and Harrell facilitate)

- Zupko mentioned the proposed wildfire commission which would be stood up for very specific report development purposes.
- Litzenberg, IAFC, asked what the composition of this working group would be.
 - Climate policy office, CEQ, NSC, OMB, etc.
 - Co-chairs: OMB, USDA, and DOI
 - NOAA, FEMA, EPA, Energy

- Potential of bringing in Americorp if they bring in a civilian conservation corp element to accomplish this work.
- Jad Daley, AF, asked how NGOs and those in the private sector support for this effort?
 - This will be critical and this is a part of the picture. The USFS is developing an engagement strategy on shared prioritization at the national and regional levels. There is discussion of a partner forum to help collectively map out how to address the needs and challenges. WFLC will also serve as a conduit to the broader WFLC membership.
- Andrea Loucks asked if labor and state are part of coordination for workforce capacity purposes?
 - Not at this time, but the way this is organized there is the ability to pull others into this group in a comprehensive way. There will be a need to share resources to accomplish shared priorities and projects.
- Zupko will be engaging additional sectors to serve as a conduit back of non-federal organizations to the IWG.

Efficient Implementation of Upcoming Wildland Fire Opportunities:

Objective: How to most efficiently utilize and implement upcoming opportunities to change the trajectory of wildland fire and impacts to people, communities and landscapes. Focus on hurdles to implementation (capacity, equipment, processes etc.) and how WFLC might address or at least be cognizant of them collectively. Help set the stage if/when those proposals move forward.

Outcomes: To explore and build awareness of potential challenges and hurdles so each organization can distill how to most efficiently, individually and collectively, facilitate the expeditious movement of resources and impact to the ground in reducing wildfire hazards, enhancing community resilience and increasing wildfire response.

Identification and understanding of potential barriers, pinch points and inefficiencies in implementing proposed increases and funding in infrastructure, reconciliation, and other legislative proposals. Awareness of how each group is approaching as well as joint opportunities to put systems in place rapidly to help facilitate efficient implementation can be identified.

Overview of infrastructure proposal, reconciliation/budget proposals and other relevant legislative opportunities: Jake Donnay, FS Legislative Affairs, Jeff Rupert, DOI Office of Wildland Fire and Eric Letvin, FEMA-mitigation branch

- Donnay, USFS, covered the wildfire focused provisions of the proposed infrastructure bill (over a 5 year period) and the reconciliation bill (over a 10 year period). (**ATTACHMENT II**)
 - 40803(f): CWPP update and implementation grant for communities
 - Infrastructure passed the Senate and is pending on the House floor. The numbers are not expected to change since it is an up or down vote that is expected to be signed by the President.
 - The reconciliation bill contains \$10 billion for hazardous fuels reduction projects within the WUI; \$4B for those outside of the WUI meeting certain condition. CFLRP funding, post-fire recovery, CCC funding, LSR, VFA, SFA, just to name a few.
 - NFS- about \$15 billion over 10 years to on-the-ground fuels treatments. Currently, there is concern over the overall price tag of the reconciliation bill,

thus these numbers are likely to change. Speaker Pelosi has set an October 31 deadline for both packages.

- Zupko asked how the wildfire provisions are faring throughout these negotiations. Donnay indicated there are going to be potential cuts, but wildfire will not be left behind.
- Jeff Rupert, DOI, highlighted the DOI provisions within both proposed bills. The ecosystem restoration section- reinforces whether talking about an acre of restoring fire adapted ecosystems in the wildfire section or restoring an acre of ecosystem health... they look the same. Good leveraged opportunities there.
- Eric Letvin, FEMA, highlighted the \$1 billion available for BRIC grants which closes end of January. Hazard mitigation was turned on for COVID declarations with \$3.46 billion available and applications due next year. State emergency management offices should be contacted if interested in this funding.
- STORM Act: \$500M in reconciliation and \$500M in infrastructure. FEMA would capitalize each of the states and states would issue a revolving loan. Local communities would be eligible to put in an application to the state for hazard mitigation.
- FEMA team on wildfire- listening sessions and white papers on this issue are upcoming. Will draft new guidance on many areas for new policy options for consideration in the following areas: early warning systems, defensible space, fuels reduction, firebreaks, and acquisitions in WUI, Rx fire, equity. Want to work with states and local entities to increase the amount of awards in wildfire. Hazard mitigation grant program post-fire are available when there is an FMAG declaration.

Currently Identified Hurdles and Challenges: Federal and non-federal members shared what their organizations are currently collating internally around specific opportunities to “come out of the gate” faster and reduce process gridlock. WFLC members and senior staff will collectively explore potential inefficiencies in implementation and delivery of programs and funding.

- WFLC hosted listening sessions for local entities, state entities, and tribal interests over the past couple months.
- Litzenberg, IAFC, discussed the challenges identified from the listening sessions. From the local perspective, they do not have the level of capacity and experience in applying for such things. Across the system, there is a lack of capacity. Can we build capacity for both planning and technical assistance into the grants? More flexibility and spending timelines were highlighted as a way that could be helpful. The biggest barrier for infrastructure is people on the ground with knowledge and skills up to the task (collaborations are a way around this). In addition to new projects, we need money to continue existing ones. Can't log our way out of this issue (biomass not just logging). Ideas: major educational push on mitigation and standardized practices; fire adaptation and education through non-traditional methods; incentivizing collaborations; workforce void in natural resources so a need to invest in the educational path more generally; creating mitigation and response people similar to IFC work with volunteers (planning or mitigation workforce to add resources into the system); education measures instead of just acres (outcome versus output measures); simplifying and streamlining grant processes including the reporting and application processes; one grant process with technical experts to fit them into the proper funding buckets was one idea.
- Geissler, NASF, summarized the state listening session. Capacity was one of the primary issues raised. Contract administrators and fiscal support in addition to the foresters and others doing work on-the-ground. Expectations up front and match requirements were two other concerns. Clarity around implementation of these bills due to the new programs and buckets of money is

lacking. Clarity for implementation and the reporting aspects will be needed in advance. Need to make certain the relationships and expectations around implementation on all parties are clear up front.

- McCarthy also highlighted the sustainability of this funding. Infrastructure and contractor capacity needs a longer-term investment to really ramp up. A transition is needed post funding so we can get the partnership and investment being sought to accomplish this work.
- Sterns, ITC, summarized the tribal listening session. Efficiency- existing authorities and programs that can be utilized- self governance and determination authorities- but these need capacity on both the federal and tribal side to use. Hiring of staff, facilities to expand staff, pay-scale, tribal cost-share amounts and administrative burdens. CWPPs and WUI- the entire landscape is important, tribal livelihoods are closely connected to the lands. Lands and homes are one in the same. Tribes are looking for parity.

Facilitated Questions and Dialogue: (Harrell and Zupko facilitate)

- Brian Ferebee, USFS, is managing the 10-year implementation strategy for the USFS and how to efficiently get these funds on-the-ground. Strategic implementation plan to operationalize this funding in a science-based approach, communication strategy, and external engagement plan.
 - 2 prong approach: looking at projects developed in a collaborative manner across lands which are in critical fireheds (year 1 and 2 shovel ready projects); engagement with internal and external partners to build the plan for years 3-10.
- George Geissler noted rapid implementation means everyone here will be competing over the same workforce pool, in addition to the other sectors within the bill which may overlap the workforce needs as well. There is a need collectively work on this in the long-term.
 - Brian Ferebee: Part of the engagement strategy will be discussing this together to identify opportunities to leverage resources.
 - Meryl Harrell: We need to look at creative ways to share resources.
- Laura McCarthy encouraged everyone to start working on the problems in year 3 and out- the capacity that needs to be built, the not shovel ready projects- early to ensure that we are not losing out on available dollars when that time comes.
- Cynthia Martinez, USFWS, supports spending year 1 and 2 planning and prioritization in advance. Look to identifying areas where fuels need to be addressed most. Need to look at a holistic model.
- Dave Applegate, USGS, as we think about what we need to prioritize what are those foundational data sets needed to support this larger picture. Identifying all of the inputs will be needed to accomplish this science-based approach successfully.
- Main takeaways include: capacity, efficiency in process, incentivizing collaboration, setting and understanding expectations.

Next Steps:

- Continued conversation, formally and informally, to help identify methodologies to build efficiencies in implementation (e.g. “Rules of Engagement”).
- Consideration for development of working groups or small teams to identify and develop processes for the efficient implementation of new offerings.
- How do we elevate these needs and issues going forward?
- Identification of potential additional groups to further garnering input from, especially non-governmental organizations.

- Zupko will be rolling up the current findings and input as well as engaging additional sectors to further understand challenges and needs from their perspective (industry, supply chain, conservation, landowner groups etc)

Additional WFLC Policy Priorities – Status Update

- America Burning: WUI (Chief Hoover, USFA)
 - Timelines: due to travel restrictions adjustments had to be made. Working on communications strategy for messaging and outreach. Target is end of 2021 for release.
- National Invasive Species Council coordination and opportunities roll up (Stas Burgiel, NISC and Zupko)
 - Working on a joint opportunities document between WFLC and NISC.
 - Document compiled opportunities which encompassed multiple themes: pre-fire management activities, fire response, postfire, funding information, and data management
 - Key next steps: pulling in non-federal WFLC members and work from NGOs and others as well.
- 2020/2021 Fire year challenges and future strategic response considerations (Zupko)
 - With the past two fire years, there are some things at the strategic level WFLC can be a part of. Conversations in thinking through many AARs occurring around the fire year- some strategic items bubbling up that can be brought to the WFLC level.
- DEI (Zupko)
 - How this fits in with all of the strategic issues. 11 strategic issues (10 + DEI). How to take this to the next level. Conversation with NACO on how counties are thinking about this.
 - Barrier- the data available for decision-making; communications and approaches.
 - Send Zupko thoughts on how DEI folds in with these different priorities.

Public Comment – *Requested from participants at the start of the meeting.*

- Cecilia Clavet, TNC, shared about wildfire resiliency engagement from TNC. New partnership with the Aspen Institute working on roadmap for wildfire resilience. November workshop around what needs to be addressed with agencies like USFS absorbing large amounts of funding. Launch event next week (see [here](#)).

Member Roundtable - Individual member items as appropriate and as time may permit.

- Nedd, BLM, agreed with the comments made around working together to address these capacity and other issues.
- Orndoff, DoD, mentioned the [DoD Climate Adaptation Plan](#).

Misc. Items

- Next WFLC virtual meeting, (Proposed December potentially hybrid virtual and in DC)
- Closeout (Zupko and Harrell)- importance of work together to change the trajectory of risk to people, landscapes, communities, etc. to get the systems approach accomplished.