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**Wildland Fire Leadership Council Meeting**  
**November 29, 2022, 8:00 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. Eastern Time**  
**Washington DC**

*Department of the Interior, 1849 C Street, Washington DC 20240*  
*South Penthouse*

**Meeting Minutes**

DRAFT

**ATTENDEES:**

**Council Members or Alternates:** Joan Mooney (DOI), Johnna Blackhair (BIA), Tracey Stone Manning (BLM), Jonah Seifer (WGA), Erika Sasser (EPA), Aitor Bidaburu (FEMA-USFA), Pat Bressey (CDC), Shaun Sanchez (FWS), Jim Durglo (ITC), Jennifer Flynn (NPS), Laura McCarthy (NGA), Rich Elliot (IAFC), George Geissler (NASF), Matt Kinglsey and Paul Andres (NaCO), Anne Kinsinger (USGS) and David Applegate (USGS), Jerry Perez (USFS), Erik Letvin (FEMA), Brett Lacey (NLC), Mike Zupko (WFLC Executive Director), RSC representatives, senior staff and other interested participants were also in attendance, in person or via zoom.

**MEETING SUMMARY**

**OPENING REMARKS AND INTRODUCTIONS**

- DOI Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Joan Mooney, and WFLC Executive Director Mike Zupko welcomed participants to the meeting and provided remarks about the meeting intent including discussions on firefighter health and wellness, prescribed fire, alignment with partner initiatives, the Wildland Fire Commission, and WH Interagency Wildfire Resilience Working Group.
- Meeting attendees introduced themselves.

**AGENDA REVIEW AND ADMINISTRATION**

- WFLC Executive Director Mike Zupko reviewed the meeting agenda, intentions, and goals.
- Minutes from the September 8, 2022, meeting in Santa Fe, NM, were unanimously approved.

## **Improving Workforce Issues (Health and Wellness focus)**

**Objective:** To understand current status of implementation and collectively explore various approaches to better addressing workforce health and wellness challenges (physical and mental health and well-being) and identify gaps and opportunities to further improve individual and connected agency and organizational systems.

- Jeff Rupert (OWF) & Aitor Bidaburu (FEMA) opened the session with an overview of the work being done to address the mental health of wildland fighting personnel. Agencies are looking at an interagency approach that focuses on work-life balance.

### Update on current implementation at the federal level in wildland fire

Kaili McCray, DOI and Julian Affuso, Forest Service provided an update of the federal work being done to address mental health with a goal of reducing firefighter overtime by 30%. Commander KJ Green, has been recently selected to serve as the DOI-FS Clinical Administrator. In accordance with the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) requirements, the overall, the focus is on building capacity in the DOI/FS Behavioral Health Program, creating a framework to serve all firefighting personnel and expanding on the work of MPHAT to support the work of the program, especially as it relates to research. The Wildland Firefighter Health and Well-being Strategic Action Planning Summit is targeted to be held in March 2023. **SLIDE**

### **ATTACHMENT I**

- Questions centered on workforce availability in the private sector, among contractors and rural firefighters and how to have the broadest reach possible. McCray stressed the actions are focused beyond wildland fire to include first responders and beyond. Strategies around housing are also important. Solutions need to come from the ground up, where the work is done.

### Additional federal agency workforce health and wellness programs / research findings

Dr. Kathleen Navarro, CDC, highlighted the research findings of the report, “Occupational Exposures and Health Effects for Wildland Firefighters.” The report highlighted pulmonary effects across individual fire shifts as well as across fire seasons. Other reports point to a correlation between firefighter exposures to noxious fumes, particulates and other chemicals and long-term health effects, including cardiovascular disease and lung cancer. USGS offered to partner and engage to bring understanding of additional dangers and highlighted JFSP’s involvement in prioritizing firefighter health and well-being and addressing those issues.

### Local Activities

Erik Litzenberg, IAFC, provided an overview of the how mental health and wellness are prioritized within IAFC through two committees. The Wildland Fire Policy Committee (addresses WUI) and the Safety, Health and Survival Committee which delves into health and safety issues across the board. IAFC and IAFF embarked on the Wellness Fitness Initiative (WFI) which focuses on physical, mental and emotional health. Peer wellness and behavioral health is critical. Key to work with WFLC to coordinate efforts around. Rick Swan, IAFF, highlighted its use of a multidisciplinary peer-wellness model to gain insight from different

perspectives and depth to diffuse issues before they go too far. **SLIDE ATTACHMENTS II and III**

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- Recommend regular reoccurring progress on these issues.
- Injury prevention and health are also important to mental health and wellness. Lands within NWCG to assess the data around injuries. Recognition that the more mental health issues, the more injuries and vice versa. Also key is the post-fire environment and the particulate dust, ash, etc. and the effects experienced there.
- The joint program between DOI and FS is working to establish a standard of care among the Bureaus and the FS.
- WFLC can leverage its relationships to support coordination of the research and engage partners.

Additional resources provided in chat:

- [https://www.frames.gov/documents/catalog/broyles\\_2013\\_wildland-firefighter-smoke-exposure\\_1351-1803.pdf](https://www.frames.gov/documents/catalog/broyles_2013_wildland-firefighter-smoke-exposure_1351-1803.pdf)
- <http://www.mcftoa.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/712-Smoke-Exposure-Guidelines.pdf>
- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9008597/>

#### Action Items:

- WFLC to facilitate the development of recommendations across membership to address identified gaps in how health and wellness is currently approached.
- Consider consolidation of best practices that can be shared across all levels of government to assist agencies and organizations with less capacity to build from existing programs (*would need staff or WG support structure*).
- Collaborate with CDC, NIOSH, USGS etc. to develop a science plan (most logically after the March Summit) to lay perform gap analysis. Consider the develop of research standards.

### **Proactive Use of Fire (Prescribed Fire focus)**

**Objective:** To understand current agency approaches to prescribed fire considering recent events as well as current activity to address longer-term. To understand the differences in methodology and ability to utilize prescribed fire across the landscape proactively, including building social and political acceptance while collectively aligning our communication strategies and ability to support each other as we strive to increase the use of prescribed fire. To understand the impacts policy and other factors have on the ability to utilize prescribed fire and proactively work for common solutions.

- Katie Lighthall facilitated the discussion around the FS Prescribed Fire Pause and the following segment on liability issues related to prescribed fire.

#### Forest Service Short- and Long-Term Approaches to Change

*Debbie Pressman, 90 day review implementation and Jerry Perez, longer term strategies.*

Jerry Perez set the stage with background on lifting the pause on prescribed fire initiated by the FS Chief. A key recommendation from the team included identifying a point of contact, Debbie Pressman, who is tasked with implementing those recommendations. Pressman highlighted first tier and second tier recommendations and the role of the Advisory and Coordinating Teams who are tasked with identifying barriers and needs in implementing prescribed fire. FS will engage with WFLC when the timing is right. **Attachment IV: Prescribed Fire Liability Insurance**  
**SLIDE ATTACHMENT V**

- WFLC and other partners may be able to play a role in the communications. Will first need to socialize the effort with WFLC and the partners and think through the engagement. In Zupko's role as Chair of the Coalition of Prescribed Fire Councils, there is a wide network available to engage on Communication. Rich Elliott offered to explore coordinating the efforts of IAFC to communicate to local communities on the value of prescribed burning.

#### Understanding Liability Challenges and Approaches

Laura Schweitzer, Council of Western State Foresters & Western Forestry Leadership Coalition highlighted the recent report initiated by Laura McCarthy (NM) and supported by George Geissler, NASF, examining prescribed fire liability insurance difficulties caused by insurers reacting to the increased risk/cost associated with wildfire. There are varying levels of liability across the country currently— strict, simple or gross negligence. Some proposals for tackling this issue include: initiating stronger burner qualifications (developing an industry standard), establishing a claims fund or insurance pool, and improving data collection to present better information regarding the risk to insurance companies. Education and networking are needed between this community and the insurance industry so they can better understand prescribed fire benefits and risks, particularly as compared to wildfires. **SLIDE ATTACHMENTS VI**

- Challenges are in the ambiguity of prescribed fire and the protections in place for burners. WFLC has been foundational in work around smoke and exposure to build objective analysis around these issues and diving into the work. Without critical data, we struggle with rhetoric which is no longer effective. WFLC is a vehicle to assist in pulling all of the data together, much as it did around smoke and engaging EPA and CDC.

#### Qualification Issues and Opportunities

Larry Mastic introduced “A New Pathway to Prescribed Fire Qualifications,” a collaboratively developed proposal to introduce the use of prescribed by qualified practitioners on across all landscapes. The proposal provides a voluntary means for practitioners (federal, state, local, tribal, contractors, private landowners) to attain nationally recognized NWCG certification without having to obtain wildfire suppression assignments. Gary Wood provided background as to how and why the proposal was developed and the connection to the Cohesive Strategy. Jonathan Stober, Coalition of Prescribed Fire Councils, presented the challenges regarding prescribed fire include the lack of national prescribed fire burner qualifications standards; there is no consistency or reciprocity among burner certification programs; there is very little training and no national prescribed fire system coordination. There is a need to increase the number of

prescribed fire practitioners and unify state requirements. NWCG pathway to being a practitioner is long and needs more flexibility. The proposal will push reciprocity to allow insurance companies to also work across landscapes. **Attachment VII: Proposed NWCG Prescribed Fire Practitioner Qualifications Alternative Pathway and SLIDE ATTACHMENTS VIII**

- Zupko acknowledged many have not seen the proposal before and shared that within NWCG this is viewed as a potential pathway forward. The question is how this meets the need and fits in with the current system or becomes a separate system. He will help to field questions and provide feedback to the team.

#### Smoke Messaging and Policy Developments/Regulatory Process

- Erika Sasser, EPA (and Tomas Carbonell-virtually) presented a high level overview of the pending proposal on reconsideration of EPA's National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS); fine particle study on long and short term exposure. The standards are set for protection of public health and secondarily for the environment. The fine particles of wildfire smoke are major pollutants and particulate matter in WUI fires are particularly impactful to the body. Conclusions from the report indicate exposure to particulate matter causes mortality and cardiovascular effects. EPA and its advisory committee supported revising its annual standard and the 24 hour standard. The proposal is under review at OMB. Question of how to manage the effects of prescribed burning – preparing communities and increasing communication to help the public understand.

#### **SLIDE ATTACHMENTS IX**

- Pete Lahm, Forest Service, Building the Toolbox for Wildfire and Smoke – Across Boundaries – How do we address the impact of wildfire smoke to address some of the issues the EPA has raised. How to carry out larger prescribed fire burns while minimizing impacts. Build relationships to jointly communicate about prescribed fire and mitigate impacts. States acknowledge needing to revise their smoke management plans to allow for more prescribed fire. **SLIDE ATTACHMENTS X**
  - Although communities receive notifications prior to prescribed burns, agencies have room to improve communications.
  - Questions addressed long term exposure is described as months to years. Short term exposure as days to weeks. Cancer is tied to long term exposure. Hence it is in that category. When evaluating what level of smoke is safe, EPA is only looking at the level of smoke, not the source. With prescribed fire, there is better opportunity to prepare communities for the exposure. Zupko also highlighted USGS and JFSP work in GA comparing wildfire smoke and prescribed fire smoke.

#### Action Items:

- Socialize WFLC's role in communications around prescribed fire through increased WFLC working group support to build out joint messages to include both expanded

smoke messaging in addition to the development of talking points to collectively support all levels of government and partners around the increased use of prescribed fire.

- Facilitate improving prescribed fire data collection to present better information regarding the risk to insurance companies
- WFLC facilitate conversations with technical experts to better understand potential policy impacts on the ability to increase the use of prescribed fire.
- Partner with the Coalition of Prescribed Fire Councils on communications and understanding policy impacts.

## **Intersection with Partner Strategies**

**Objective:** To enhance understanding, align strategies, and leverage resources with partner entities working on issues of shared interest with WFLC Members.

- CC Clavet, TNC, heading up the Wildfire Resilience Policy Campaign in collaboration with the Aspen Institute. The workshops will inform the drafting of the Roadmap and focused on FS BIL implementation, innovative funding for wildfire resilience, leveraging partnerships for success, equity in post-fire restoration and resilience, and integrating socio-economics into wildfire resilience. Cross-cutting issues are workforce and equity and access. Technology and innovation were added to the Roadmap. Next steps include release in March 2023 and a briefing update at a future WFLC meeting.
  - Zupko indicated WFLC can use the Roadmap as a tool to build out opportunities around defining issue work.
- Stas Burgiel, NISC, updated from the January 2022 briefing to WFLC and joint NISC/WFLC leadership memo. Invasive species can exacerbate wildland fire. NISC and WFLC partnership serves to address invasives on the landscape. DOD, Commerce, DOI and Agriculture provided 13 opportunities to look at the sequential process of wildland fire, building a framework and incorporating science.
  - Zupko discussed the opportunity for federal agencies to leverage the recently distributed joint leadership memo in helping to focus work activities around the intersect of wildland fire and invasive issues and implementation on the ground.
- Laura Schweitzer, CWSF and Western Forestry Leadership Coalition, presented on the True Cost of Wildfire report. The True Cost of Wildfire in the Western U.S. describes the full range of costs associated with wildland fire in the Western U.S. in order to help inform leaders and policymakers working to improve wildfire response and mitigation. Wildfire cost information has, in the past, primarily focused on suppression costs and structure losses; however, this report shows that there are many other types of costs relating to values such as human health, water supply, transportation, the labor market, and local economics, among others. The report also shows how targeted investments in mitigation produce ancillary benefits, such as healthier and more resilient forests and rangelands, which can potentially lead to a reduction in catastrophic wildfire event costs

later. Case studies of eight major western wildfires are featured in the report to illustrate the variety of wildfire cost types. The report concludes with a roadmap of subsequent steps that would be needed in order to advance a consistent and comprehensive system of wildfire cost accounting, including research, data collection, and information management.

- Digital version of report available at: <https://www.thewflc.org/resources>
- Zupko noted using the report to determine how WFLC can work to close the data gaps identified.

#### Action Items:

- Explore opportunities for WFLC to use the wildfire resilience roadmap as a tool for WFLC to build upon.
- Zupko and Burgiel work with WFLC member agencies to help utilize the leadership memo and the broader opportunities document to inform decision processes.
- Zupko and Burgiel develop a strategy for engaging non-federal WFLC members and partners to incorporate the joint opportunities documents into other initiatives.
- WFLC, with USGS assistance, help convene and/or communicate these findings from the True Cost Report and opportunities across the entire wildland fire management system to help expand these partnerships.
- Examine how to work with WFLC members to help close data gaps to support the advancement of a consistent and comprehensive system of wildfire cost accounting

### **Wildland Fire Management System Coordination** *(WFLC / Interagency Wildfire Resilience Working Group / Wildfire Mitigation and Management Commission)*

**Objective:** To build understanding of the current state of activities stemming from the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission and the White House Interagency Wildfire Resilience Working Group.

#### Wildfire Commission Update

Annie Schmidt and Tyson Bertone-Riggs

- Commission Workgroups have begun meetings. The website has a portal for anyone to present ideas to the Commission workgroups. The Cohesive Strategy Workgroup has the most overlap with WFLC.
  - Commission members are making short and long-term recommendations from policy directives to providing legislative direction.
  - Where the Congressional question may not be appropriately directed, the working groups have taken the liberty to reframe the question in order to answer the question that will evoke change.
  - SMEs will be banked and their expertise utilized at the length and depth needed by the particular workgroup (i.e. Smoke).

## Interagency Wildfire Resilience Working Group update

Jenna Knobloch

- IWG has two active subgroups. One focused on Smoke and the other focused on Post-Fire Impacts. The Post-Fire Impact subgroup will meet in Colorado in January. Focused on Post-Fire coordination. The IWG will present agency recommendations to WFLC, the federal agency leadership and help to inform the Commission.

### Action Items:

- Continued understanding by WFLC membership of the current activities of each organization, their interrelationship and opportunities to leverage.
- Zupko will continue to coordinate between the three groups and identify engagement opportunities for WFLC to contribute to issues and facilitate broader partner engagement across all organizations.

## **WFLC Cohesive Strategy Refresh – Status**

Zupko presented the current status and mentioned there was feedback from the Wildfire Commission that was considered and adjusted as appropriate in the most recent version. Feedback indicated there were no major gaps and the input provided verbiage/wording changes. The Commission's charge was to review, not rewrite, the Cohesive Strategy. The final draft will be considered complete when the Wildfire Commission finalizes their recommendations around CS then a final version for approval by WFLC members will be distributed at that time.

## **WFLC Engagement**

Zupko discussed how increased capacity for WFLC will help take advantage of multiple opportunities currently while also setting the stage for implementation of Wildfire Commission recommendations, IWG and other implementation needs in the near future. WFLC has been around for 20+ years and continues to be a viable entity, but with additional partners desiring greater intersection as a part of WFLC operations, there is a question of what is the right WFLC staff mix for increased interaction and issue engagement. The WFLC co-chairs have discussed the opportunity and requested Zupko put together a proposal for consideration.

## **Public Comment**

- Jessica Blackband, Federation of American Scientists (FAS), presented comment on FAS' ongoing work in the wildfire arena. In October, FAS partnered with three organizations to launch the Wildland Fire Accelerator to respond to academia, non-profits, etc. to inform actionable policy recommendation. The recommendations are targeted to the Commission and will be shared with WFLC.

## Misc. Items

- WFLC MOU Status
  - Zupko reported the WFLC MOU established with Agriculture, DOI, EPA and DOD has been updated to reflect additional membership along with some minor wording changes. It is currently under review by USDA and DOI departmental staff.
- Upcoming WFLC meetings
  - WFLC will meet in Klamath Falls the week of March 13<sup>th</sup> (Wednesday/Thursday) for a field meeting.
  - WFLC will meet in Washington, DC the week of June 6<sup>th</sup>, potential for two days.
  - WFLC is also slated to hold a field meeting early/mid-September in Yosemite.
- Jenn Flynn (NPS) shared the NPS Fire Chief position is open. It is a SES position.
- Closeout
  - Zupko expressed his appreciation for engagement on the range of issues WFLC addresses.
  - Co-chair Mooney closed by acknowledging the difficult work, especially in light of the once in a generation opportunity. With thank yous to the members, Zupko, Lighthall and DOI-OWF.