

Utah's Implementation of the National Cohesive Wildfire Management Strategy

A Presentation to Forest Service Leadership

February 26, 2014 – Denver, Colorado

Context

Following an attention grabbing 2012 fire season, Governor Gary Herbert tasked Utah Department of Agriculture Commissioner Leonard Blackham to *“develop a comprehensive and systematic strategy to reduce the size, intensity and frequency of catastrophic wildland fires in Utah.”*

Commissioner Blackham established a steering committee to guide development of that strategy which included representation from state and federal wildland fire management and other agencies, the Governor's office, county commissioners, and two conservation organizations – The Nature Conservancy, and Trout Unlimited which I represented.

Two Prong Approach to Respond to Governor's Charge

To meet the Governor's charge a two prong approach is being taken. The first prong was development of a high level strategic document that:

- Promotes understanding of the problem and current efforts to manage wildfire in Utah
- Establishes a shared vision, goals and guiding principles – adopting the three goals of the CS without modification
- Identifies the primary challenges to accomplishment of the vision
- Presents recommendations to address those challenges – including a subset from the Western Region Strategy

Break-through paradigm shifts in the Utah strategy include:

- Need to address underlying issues (particularly landscape resilience)
- Embraces role of fire as significant component of the solution
- Focuses on risk reduction and coordinated prioritization of investments
- Acknowledges need for shared responsibility (particularly the need for action by communities)
- Recognizes that this isn't just a “fire deal” – and the need for a transparent, accessible, place specific planning process to build social license to act.

I have brought a copy of the Utah strategy for each of you to peruse at your convenience.

The second prong involves development of a risk assessment and mitigation planning process that was piloted by six multi-stakeholder Regional Work Groups with an intention of improving and applying it state-wide in the future. Development of that process was guided by scientists at the Rocky Mountain Research Station. (Thanks Sam & John)

Figure 1 outlines the major components of our risk assessment and mitigation planning process.

In essence the process focuses on developing a better understanding of the high value resources and assets at risk (type, amount and importance), likelihood of the threat – or hazard (burn probability and intensity) – which when considered together, promotes a deeper understanding of the relative risk among Utah communities at risk.

The mitigation planning process required identification of a comprehensive suite of actions and associated costs proposed to reduce risk to the HVRAs – explicitly addressing all three goals: promoting landscape and community resilience and improving the effectiveness, efficiency and safety of wildfire management.

Our pilot process employs an “expert panel” approach to evaluate the probability that suite of actions would actually reduce risk to the HVRAs – considering three important factors: effectiveness, practicality, and community support – where:

- the judgment on effectiveness is focused on a technical assessment of whether risk would be reduced IF the suite of measures were implemented
- the judgment on practicality is focused on a technical assessment of how likely it is the suite of measures could be implemented (e.g., consistency with law, availability of technology and/or infrastructure)
- the judgment on community support is focused on a subjective assessment of current social license to implement the suite of actions

If there is an issue with effectiveness, practicality and/or community support, the probability of the proposed actions actually reducing risk is low or non-existent.

Consideration of all three components of the middle layer of this schematic (relative risk, probability of reducing risk, and cost) provides a “starting point” to set priorities for investment in Utah’s communities at risk. I say “starting point” because there is no intent for a mechanical application of the analysis. Rather the process provides for a feedback loop to promote a deeper understanding to inform the Steering Committee’s recommendations on investment priorities.

Next Steps and Conclusion

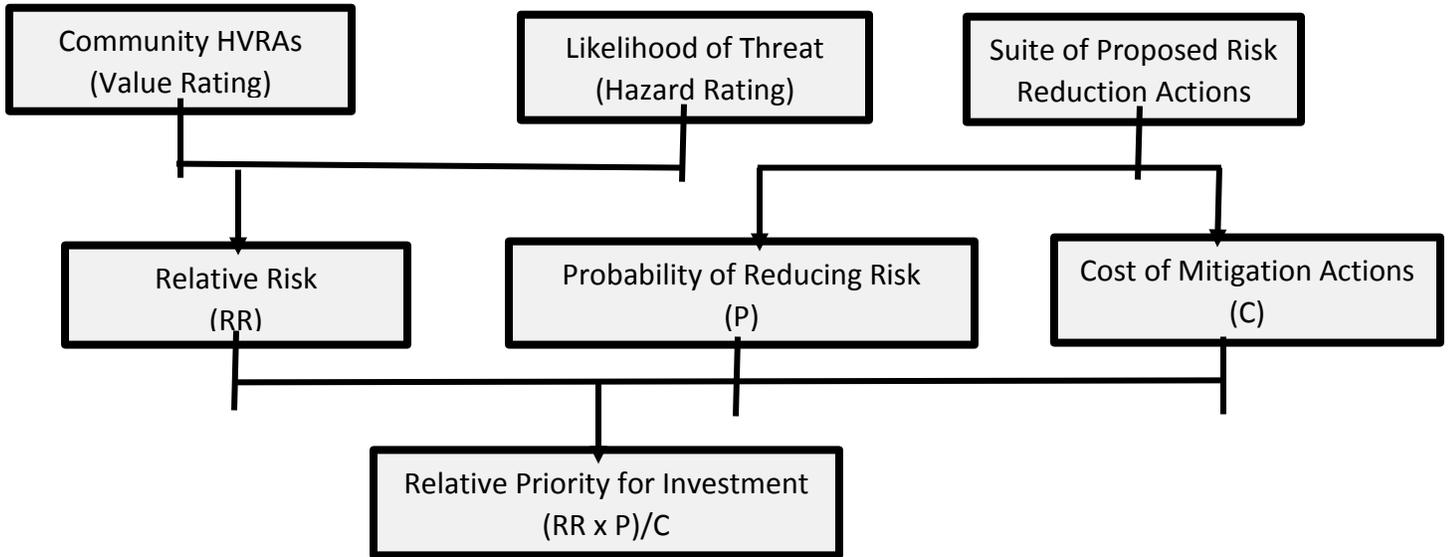
We have made a good start in Utah at implementation of the CS at a state-wide scale, but have much work to do. However, interest and political support for doing so is high. Based on the strategic plan, and the results of our pilot risk assessment efforts the Governor included in his proposed budget a request for \$4 million to implement some high priority prevention actions identified through the pilot process. That request appears to be sailing through the State Legislature, and I believe will be the first time State funds have been authorized in Utah for such actions.

As we move forward with the comprehensive state-wide application of the risk assessment and mitigation planning process we will continue to need the assistance of Forest Service Research personnel – and increased participation of National Forest System personnel. I hope agency leadership will see the value of making those investments. I believe this model has significant potential for refinement and application in other western states, and that doing so will deliver on the high expectations for the CS – greater:

- landscape and community resilience
- more effective, efficient and safe wildfire management

Thanks for your attention!

Figure 1. Utah Wildfire Risk Assessment and Prioritization for Investment.



Community HVRA (Values Threatened)

- Type (HL, BI, MW, CP, FW, AP, OT)
- Amount (Population, spatial area)
- Importance (VH, H, M with limits on # that can be ranked VH or H)
- Value Rating by HVRA (amount x importance)
- Total Relative Value Rating (sum)

Likelihood of Threat

- Burn Probability (BP)
- Probable Intensity (CFL)
- Hazard Rating by HVRA (BP x CFL)

Relative Risk

- Risk Rating by HVRA (value x hazard)
- Total Relative Risk (sum)

Proposed Risk Reduction Activities

- Activities and spatial location of activities proposed to reduce risk to identified HVRA
- Viewed as a “suite” that addresses all three goals of the CS (landscape and community resilience and the efficiency, effectiveness and safety of wildfire management)

Probability of Reducing Risk (use of expert panels)

- Community Support
- Effectiveness
- Practicality
- Overall Probability (product)

Cost of Risk Mitigation

- Estimate of initial cost and required maintenance for 20 years

Relative Priority for Investment

- RR x P/C
- Starting point (w/feedback loop to Steering Committee)