

“Better than Ever”: Partnership of Community Liaisons, USFS & Incident Management Cohesive Strategy Success Story

State: California

Goal 2: Fire Adapted Communities

“They listened and did what they said they would,” a formula for success in any relationship; building trust with communication and follow-up action. In 2013, in the sparsely populated Salmon River Basin of Klamath National Forest (NF), this scenario played out between Cohesive Strategy collaborators: the Klamath National Forest, a Federal Incident Management Team, and the local Fire Safe Council Community Liaisons Program (CLP).

The Salmon River Fire Safe Council (FSC) mission is “to help plan, implement and monitor the reinstatement of natural fire regimes in the Salmon River ecosystem in a manner that protects life and property, improves forest health, and enhances the resources valued by its stakeholders.”

Accordingly, the FSC under director Karuna Greenberg has been working on two levels of fire planning: a draft [Community Wildfire Protection Plan](#) (CWPP) for the entire watershed and more [detailed CWPPs](#) for towns and neighborhoods in the watershed. The Council established their CLP to create professional and planned information management among community members and between a single primary community liaison and an individual from Incident Command, during every fire. Their model has been so successful that at the start of the 2013 fire season the head of local US Forest Service unit, Klamath NF Forest Supervisor Patty Grantham, asked all other Klamath FSCs to copy the Salmon River model for their programs.

In its natural state, the Salmon River watershed is a fire-adapted landscape that has evolved with a relatively frequent recurrence of non-catastrophic wildfires, caused by lightning strikes. These fires are necessary to maintain species composition and ecological balance, but the occurrence of naturally ignited, fuel-reducing fire was changed by large-scale fire suppression in the early 1900s. The Salmon River watershed is one of the highest risk fire areas on the entire Klamath National Forest and has had the greatest concentration of wildfires in Siskiyou County.

Population: ~300/150 year-round

Land ownership: ~98.5% Federal



Smoke during the 2008 wildfire on the Salmon River, photo by Jeff Buchin

The CLP began in 2009 following a hectic fire season in 2008. Five towns met and laid out geographic management zones and a coordination flow chart for contacts from each neighborhood of each town: Somes Bar, Forks of Salmon, Cecilville, Sawyers Bar and Bear Country. Planning coordination pathways prepared the CLP for efficient communication amongst neighborhoods and also established a single primary liaison who would talk with local United States Forest Service (USFS) personnel and others from Incident Command (IC) and the Incident Management Team (IMT).

During an Incident: How CLP and IMT Succeed Together

According to Salmon/Scott District Ranger Dave Hays, USFS, and District Fire Management Officer Toby Harold, the first factor critical to success of the CLP during the 2013 Salmon Complex was the established **liaison team coordination flow chart** with primary and secondary contacts for the overall area, each town and each neighborhood. **Residents and Incident Commanders alike could identify the one person to talk to for any concern, and knew they would be heard and respected.** Their input would be acted upon whenever appropriate. This established trust. Having only the CLP primary contact for the area interacting with the IMT simplified the flow of information. **To complement, the IMT designated a single contact** to convey updates on the suppression efforts to the community liaison.

Second, the Salmon River Fire Safe Council ongoing education programs had already educated residents and volunteer liaisons about what communication modalities were available during incidents, and how to use them to obtain and report information. Telephone landlines, internet, and cb radio are the methods of communication in the Salmon River basin, so person-to-person calls, social media, email and websites were key sources for relaying information. Inciweb and Facebook were primary among internet resources used.

Finally, the **CLP primary contact met with the IMT early and often.** The liaison attended **all IMT briefings and meetings** for regular, timely updates on the incident, then conveyed current information through established channels to the community. **Locals expected and received an explanation of the initial suppression strategy, progress reports, and feedback on their concerns from the IMT through the community liaison.** Since the USFS includes the locals of the Fire Safe Council in planning, but not ultimate decision making, for incidents, it was important to the people that agreed upon plans resulted in well executed actions. This was the third factor critical to success of the community liaison program during the Salmon Complex.

During-Incident Critical Success Factors (Salmon Complex 2013):

- 1) Having a single point of contact from the suppression efforts (FS) talking with community.
- 2) Knowing what communication modalities were available and using them (in this case a phone tree for landlines (no cell service), internet-based social media (Facebook) to amplify/rebroadcast Inciweb, cb radio.
- 3) Community liaisons getting all current updates from IMT being present at IC briefings, IC meetings, and public meetings.

How did CLP's preparation for and management of the 2013 Salmon Complex establish trust between the USFS, IMT and local communities?

The IMT came early, and met often with the community liaison. "They listened and did what they said they would," points out FSC Secretary Kathy McBroom, who in her central administrative role for Salmon River interacts with every IMT that comes through on assignment. (During-Incident Critical

Success Factor number 3). McBroom continues, **“We seem to be better partners now than we ever were in the past.”** One reason the partnership is so invaluable is that the Federal agencies no longer have the budget to do all the work of fire response, land management or coordination here by themselves. Cooperation is key to preparing, managing and surviving, successfully. (During-Incident Critical Success Factor 1; Before-Incident Critical Success Factors 1-8).

Klamath National Forest’s Forest Supervisor Patty Grantham, an avid five year supporter of the CLP, adds that **USFS knows Klamath communities to be very savvy, proactive, and prepared for fire in the landscape** after living through fires in 1977, ’87, and ’08.

“The residents show up, they want to be involved, they are proactive and very knowledgeable about fire. If there is a large wildfire near a community, you want to work with these types of people,” says Grantham.

“Folks living in the Salmon River have seen as much firefighting in their lives as seasoned Incident Commanders. Residents know the winds and the microclimates, and have done a lot to fire safe their homes and property. They are true partners when it comes to community protection from fire.”

How did the community liaison program contribute to successful management of the Salmon Complex in 2013?

One reason the program worked so well was the **USFS was willing to work with locals** due to the strong FSCs in the area, in Scott Valley, and in Yreka, and people locally were aware of how the CLP would interact with USFS. (Before-Incident Critical Success Factors 1-4). **Another reason was that FSC tools in place had made the community aware and ready to work on their own and with partners.** These Tools included our CWPP, monthly meetings, workshops, and awareness raising activities such as on-the-ground meetings in a variety of places, especially post fire, one-on-one visits with residents and newsletters put out to contact lists through email and postal mail. The FSC provides help with grants for fuels reduction around homes (Before-Incident Critical Success Factor 3).

What are the predictors and conditions of future success with the program?

The USFS will need to maintain desire to work with the public, partners, and whoever is willing to help. The CLP will need to maintain its coordination, organization, and preparedness, expecting to support the Federal agencies in managing incidents.

Before an Incident Occurs: How to Prepare a Community Liaison Program

The success of this CLP required significant organization in advance of an incident. Eight factors that contributed to successful preparation are listed below. Factors 1-4 relate to managing expectations and trust, while 5-8 relate to organization and ownership. These factors combined led to a positive outcome of Salmon River’s CLP on the 2013 Salmon Complex.

Before-Incident Critical Success Factors (Salmon Complex 2013):

1-4 Expectations & Trust

- 1) Communication pathways were planned. A detailed liaison team coordination flow chart described who from CLP interacts with IC & local USFS, with tiers of subsequent community contacts who pass along the information to keep their neighborhoods informed.
- 2) Communities knew how they would get current Incident information. CLP worked with locals throughout the year and during the incident through known lines of contact. They also worked with incoming IMTs to establish suppression strategies they then conveyed to the public so people would know what to expect.
- 3) Community Liaisons Program was already established, so locals trusted it.
 - a. FSC had connected community through CWPPs, monthly meetings, workshops, and awareness raising activities such as on-the-ground meetings in a variety of places- especially post fire, one-on-one visits with residents and newsletters put out to contact lists through email and postal mail. Provided help with grants for fuels reduction around homes
- 4) FSC/CLP expected to be involved in planning (but not decision making).

5-8 Organization & Ownership

- 5) Ownership: CLP is “owned and managed by the community” so they don’t rely on the FS but encourage engagement.
- 6) Organizational/Personnel Factors: CLP contacts include retired FS personnel as officers and as local Volunteer Fire Chief (Jim Bennett).
- 7) Organizational/Fiscal Factors: FSC volunteers operate under a fiscal sponsor nonprofit SRRC, which is funded by many grants and agreements to bring capacity including FT and PT employees. SRRC preserves and applies local knowledge from the many that have lived through major events and have a sound understanding of fire management.
- 8) Jurisdiction: Only two agencies generally respond to incidents. Volunteer FSC initially responds, then requests USFS as needed, simplifying communication, and response. The simplicity of jurisdictional responsibility makes possible the community liaison program, as it is here.

How can communities just beginning to coordinate a fire safe council and local liaisons program, gain funding and support, and connect to other active communities?

Salmon FSC director Karuna Greenberg advises “Don’t be shy about calling grant managers to have them walk you through the process. They can and will help with proposals for grant funding, and there is a lot of funding for CWPPs for new organizations. The more inclusive your group is, the more broad community support you will have, the better, so include all segments of your community as early and often as possible in building your program.” For Salmon River, this meant connecting with residents, nonprofits, restoration councils, fire and rescue, US Forest Service, tribal councils, fish & game, US Fish and Wildlife service, the water board and others. Keeping planning records and doing an after-action review, like the Salmon River FSC did for the CLP in 2013, can show the effectiveness of and need for programs, when applying to keep funding or garner additional support.

For funding and other resources available to community organizations just starting up, fireadapted.org has a state-by-state directory of information to help startups connect with and become Fire Adapted Communities.

For More Information

For further information about this Cohesive Strategy collaboration please contact:

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