**V. Community Participation and Education**

**Introduction**

Union County is characterized by large blocks of public lands and a patchwork of jurisdictions and ownership in which multi-agency protection may be involved in managing wildland fire incidents; approximately 50 percent of the county is privately owned. As a result, collaboration efforts are key to integrating local land agencies, fire protection agencies, cooperators, and members of the public in an attempt to create a local stakeholders partnership. The first step in accomplishing a partnership was to share information regarding existing concerns, conditions, and efforts in creating a comprehensive community wildfire protection plan. To ensure full success in implementing a collaborative approach it was important to identify issues and individual roles in mitigating those issues. Sharing responsibility established a sense of ownership in both the mitigation of wildfire impacts and increasing the effectiveness of fire protection agencies.

Meetings were designed to collectively work with rural fire departments, cooperators, and community members to develop the wildfire protection plan. Goals of this process were to:

1. Build upon existing partnerships and create new opportunities within the communities.
2. Provide Union County community members with tools, methods, and the opportunity to partake in wildfire risk reduction.
3. Demonstrate the importance of shared responsibility in wildfire prevention, risk reduction, and forest management.
4. Identify additional opportunities for understanding what can be expected during the three phases of evacuation and wildfire events. (Pre, During, Post)

Efforts were made to gather local knowledge to include in the CWPP along with input identified in the fire risk assessment of the WWRA, in order to provide as thorough a plan as possible. Plan development was based on as much diverse input as possible, in order to meet the needs of all landowners, cooperators and local fire management. This type of approach accomplishes several things.

1. It provides an opportunity to validate map display modeling data for accuracy with input by local resources with on the ground knowledge and expertise.
2. It establishes a collaboration forum essential for obtaining funding, especially for federal agencies through the Healthy Forest Restoration Act, thereby improving treatment opportunities on public lands and reducing potential for fire spread onto private lands. Collaboration-based decisions offer more opportunities toward efficient and effective approaches.
3. Improved chances for competitiveness in grant programs designed to provide support to state, counties, local fire departments and communities to prepare for and recover from wildfires.
4. Provides a message that is consistent with the Cohesive Wildfire Strategy to improve wildfire response, build a fire-adapted community, and move toward a resilient landscape to increase opportunities for effective suppression efforts while maintaining a healthy ecosystem.
5. Provides mutual understanding of local environmental conditions to better prepare Union County communities and fire managers for wildland fire events.
6. Provides the county with a plan based specifically on local needs and expectations.

All the meetings generated a similar message on why local knowledge was important to the CWPP process:

1. Local involvement allows the plan to be a needs-based process on what is and is not working and identifying ways to improve wildfire protection.
2. Recognizes a cohesive community approach through collaboration is imperative for success.
3. Provides a means of validation of base information and verification that a need exists.
4. Creates opportunities to incorporate new ideas and new approaches offered by local community members.

**Outreach**

Several avenues were used to incorporate local communities into the CWPP process. Media outlets, such as Facebook and local web sites, were used to reach out to the public. These were found to be the best source in linking local citizens to the Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) process. Use of the Emergency Services Facebook page provided the ability to see the number of times the information was shared and an avenue for directly responding to questions.

Additional methods in reaching out to citizens and cooperators included radio announcements, newspaper articles, postal service mailed letters sent out to cooperators, and email messages. Included in outreach materials and announcements were: intent of meetings and dates, opportunities to be locally involved, and local contacts for more information.

The CWPP committee designed workshops and community meetings using the outreach mechanisms in an attempt to reach as many Union County citizens as possible. All workshops provided:

* An overview of West Wide Risk Assessment (WWRA) framework, highlighting various input data with the three key outcomes of Fire Threat Index, Fire Effects Index, and overall Final Risk Index.
* Information about Firewise and Ready, Set, Go concepts
* Accomplishments achieved under the original 2005 CWPP
* The rationale and need to expand on current efforts
* How local conditions benefit or hinder achieving the three primary goals in the CWPP.
* Opportunities to work with local fire management in education and project design for reducing wildfire risks

**Rural Fire Departments (RFD)**

Union County is supported by seven different rural fire departments that respond to both structural and wildland fires. These rural fire departments have jurisdiction responsibilities on approximately 250,630 acres combined. A Rural Fire Department representative was a member of the steering committee throughout the CWPP development. Opportunities for RFDs to provide input during the process were key in the development of mitigation action items. One of the local Fire Defense Board meetings allotted the CWPP committee ample time on their agenda to conduct an information sharing meeting.

**Outreach**

Cooperators were sent a hard copy, three-page letter via postal service with follow up email regarding the meeting date, location, and agenda. The letter provided a preliminary overview of the Cohesive Wildfire Strategies’ three key goals as the foundation for the updated CWPP.

The letter stated,

*“It is our hope that through these three goals that you as Fire Chiefs can begin to consider what and where improvements are needed, shortfalls exist, and opportunities for new innovative ideas can occur. We encourage you to approach your needs and recommendation on the premise that,*

*In a perfect world with available finances, what needs to be done to better protect life (firefighter and public) and property in the WUIs within your jurisdiction?”*

A list of topic categories was provided with the letter to provoke thoughts and ideas in advance of the meeting. The list of specific issues was focused on areas that could potentially impact or enhance the county’s capabilities of meeting the three CWS goals. These topic categories included: risk assessment in terms of life and property, potential structure loss or survivability, fuels treatment options/reduction, emergency management, collaboration/partnerships, education/outreach, technology and reporting systems, etc.

**Union County Fire Defense Board Meeting**

The Fire Defense Board meeting on January 22, 2015 provided an ideal forum for CWPP committee members to work with representatives from the following rural fire departments: Elgin, Cove, Union, La Grande Rural, North Powder, Medical Springs, and Imbler, as well as representatives from the Oregon State Fire Marshal’s office, La Grande City Fire, and Oregon Department of Forestry.

Rural fire departments arrived prepared to discuss all aspects of fire protection with the CWPP committee and provide input into CWPP process. There was representation of all fire departments, with some having multiple attendees. This meeting was productive and informative, and included discussion of current positive efforts, rural needs, and county and rural response concerns.

Highlights of the meeting included updates on the CWPP process and the Cohesive Wildfire Strategy key goals. Discussions centered around issues regarding road access to both homes and geographic areas, water sources, future mitigation action items, public education, wildfire response capabilities, equipment and technological shortfalls, qualifications/training, home protection treatment options, communications, information sharing, and new opportunities. Specific action items developed out of the meeting are detailed in Chapter VII Mitigation Measures and Fuels Treatment.

**Cooperators**

The meeting was structured to accomplish the following Items:

* Review maps of known locations of infrastructure for accuracy.
* Discuss issues that could potentially impact or enhance the county’s capabilities of response in terms of planning for, providing protection during a wildfire, and/or influencing efforts after a wildfire has occurred.
* Actively involve cooperators in developing options specific to their interests that improve their ability to effectively interact and coordinate with other cooperators and fire agencies in a wildfire emergency situation.

In order to narrow down cooperators, the committee recognized that involvement would be limited for some and extended for others. A list of 22 cooperators was identified based on their potential involvement with wildland fire in order to focus efforts toward the CWPP.

Cooperators contacted for the meeting fell into one or more of the three categories below:

* Those who have existing infrastructure in the area that has potential to either be compromised during a fire or could potentially impede suppression efforts. (i.e. transmission lines / Highway department)
* Those who are regularly involved in fire response when communities at risk are involved (Sheriff Department)
* Those who would need to be notified in the event of potential evacuations (i.e.: Red Cross)

Some cooperators met all categories, while others may only be involved at certain times of the fire or on a specific fire based on location. A full list of cooperators can be found in Appendix H.

Cooperators Workshop

A meeting was held on March 26, 2015 at the La Grande Fire Department conference room on Cove Avenue.

Meeting turnout resulted in only cooperator in attendance, a representative from Idaho-Northern Railroad. Although the turnout was very low, the accomplishments were numerous.

The meeting proceeded as planned with discussions regarding:

1. Railroad ignitions along right-of-way with a focus on areas that are more susceptible to starts such as Reinheart Gap between Imbler and Elgin and the hard pull between Balm and McAlister Road.
2. The railroad’s fire prevention plan and possibilities of fire agencies working with the railroad to further improve the plan. Include within the plan direction for local fire agencies regarding suppression strategies and tactics such as: retardant use, fire patrol once the fire is controlled, etc.
3. Possibilities of an option for prevention and suppression training to be made available to railroad personnel.
4. Identifying and developing agreements and coordination opportunities that may help combine efforts in prevention and suppression.

Additional cooperator and rural fire department input was obtained during the Union County wildfire simulation conducted on May 21, 2015. As a mock wildfire situation, it provided insight on strengths and weaknesses prior to an actual incident. This simulation resulted in approximately 23 participants by local cooperators.

**Local Residents and Communities**

Involving community members occurred in the form of meetings, radio announcements, Firewise and Ready-Set-Go pamphlets, boots on the ground, information surveys, and multimedia forums in an attempt to reach as many citizens as possible.

Outreach

Notifications of meeting dates were conducted in the form of radio, newspaper articles, and web based announcements. Announcements of meeting dates were also posted on Union County Emergency Service Facebook page and Web site.

A news article listing the meetings was submitted to the La Grande Observer, emphasizing local fire organization efforts to involve the public to create a cohesive fire prevention and fire response program. The article highlighted some CWPP efforts to identify ways to promote fire-adapted communities to enable people to live in a fire-prone environment and mitigate loss in the event of a wildland fire, looked at ways to increase the forest’s resiliency and health, especially around homes, and looked into ways to improve safety for both fire fighters and the public.

The news release asked the community for help identifying and addressing values at risk, evacuation routes, bridges, roads, access/egress concerns, and water sources, and offered opportunities for community members to take a role in fire prevention and protection efforts.

Three public meetings were held in the county: in La Grande, then Elgin, and finally in the town of Union. The meetings were scheduled as follows:

6 pm on April 21 at La Grande Fire Department, 1806 Cove Avenue,

6 pm on April 30 in Elgin at the Fire Hall,

6 pm on May 6th at Union Fire Hall

Public meetings

Turnout for the public meetings and survey responses were both very limited. The meetings resulted in a show of one individual in La Grande, two in Elgin, and two in Union. It is worth noting that during the Phillips Creek Fire (Chapter IV) in August of 2015, frequent public meetings were conducted resulting in an average between 50 and 100 attendees, however, a post-fire wrap up and general operations meeting put on by the Umatilla National Forest staff resulted in similar attendance as the CWPP meetings.

Although low in turnout, the meetings were conducted to provide those present with updates and new information and to obtain feedback from attendees. A holistic approach toward community fire protection through partnership was the desired outcome. Using the new National Cohesive Wildfire Strategy, the committee incorporated its three key goals as the foundation in achieving a synergistic, planned approach in the new CWPP.

The focus of the meetings was to share information about current CWPP committee activities regarding plan development, current county fire risks, ongoing collaborative efforts, fire organization and landowner responsibilities, and ways to get involved in the process. Meetings were also designed to build new and improve existing partnerships with the community. Through the meetings, we provided tools, methods, and opportunities for playing an active role in risk reduction measures. Emphasis was put on using community input to help develop portions of the CWPP and design a plan that encouraged landowner involvement in wildfire risk reduction

Several key messages were presented at the meetings to create an informative forum with up-to-date information. Discussion topics included:

* Planning efforts with an overview of the history of Union County’s CWPP, describing the plans accomplishments and benefits since inception.
* An overview of the new Cohesive Wildfire Strategy and its three goals of Wildfire Response, Restoring and Maintaining Landscapes with high focus on Fire Adapted Communities
* Overview of the role of West Wide Risk Assessment role and the importance of local knowledge input.
* Opportunities for the steering committee to discuss the level of fire occurrence in their area, overview of the risk assessment, values threatened by wildfire risk, plan completion timeline, and work completed under the 2005 CWPP.
* The majority of the meeting time was given to discussions with community members about their concerns, roles, and involvement in wildfire risk reduction and protection.
* An opportunity for the CWPP committee to hear the public’s input related to emergency services, fire agency response, and perception of fire risk on their properties.
* Additional emphasis was put on the importance of shared responsibility in wildfire prevention, risk reduction and forest management. With 47 percent of the WUIZ’s ignitions being human-caused, it was imperative that the potential to prevent wildfires was understood. It was key to send a message of “we are in this together” in wildfire risk reduction and prevention. Collective responsibility was also emphasized through program pamphlets offered during the meetings.
* Information was shared regarding assistance opportunities to landowners for creating defensible space while living in fire adapted communities and how best to prepare themselves through collaborative efforts and available programs. Pamphlets and information were distributed explaining programs such as Firewise and Ready-Set-Go.

Programs

Firewise is a community-based program that emphasizes involving homeowners in local solutions for wildland fire protection. It has a five-step process, in which communities develop an action plan that guides their residential fire risk reduction activities while engaging and encouraging their neighbors to become active participants in building a safer place to live (Firewise 2015). Firewise empowers neighbors to work with protection agencies to reduce wildfire risk across boundaries through a collaborative approach, of creating fire-adapted communities. Firewise encompasses actions that involve wildfire education, planning, on-site implementation of mitigation measures, and communication with those involved in protection from the risk of wildfire.

Nationally recognized for their program, Firewise focuses on communities and homeowners taking responsibility and showing interest in creating and maintaining defensible space; ensuring adequate access; addressing signage; and building or retrofitting structures designed with non-combustible building material in terms of siding, decks, and roofing. It is co-sponsored by the USDA Forest Service, the US Department of the Interior, and the National Association of State Foresters.

Ready-Set-Go

This program started in March of 2011 and strives to develop and improve the discussion and information flow between local community members and local fire organizations. It is designed to better equip fire personnel with tools to teach local residents in fire-prone wildland areas how best prepare for personal safety and protect their properties against wildfire. Ready-Set-Go emphasizes preparedness in all hazard situations.

This information was outlined and made available at the public meetings with discussions on not only landscape preparation, but also on key issues that many structures have that make them more receptive to burning embers cast off from the fire. Discussion occurred covering how wildland and structure preparedness prior to a wildfire can increase personal and fire fighter safety, improving the likelihood of a positive outcome after a wildfire.

Ready-Set-Go represents the steps to be taken long before a wildfire as well as during a wildfire. The CWPP committee came prepared to discuss ways to be ready well in advance of a fire occurring in their area, finding funding sources to help, and how to find workforce help if needed. Emphasis was put on local fire personnel’s willingness to work in conjunction with landowners to protect life and property. Additionally, the meeting was aimed at increased public understanding and situational awareness once a fire was burning in the area through preparing emergency items to take and staying informed on current situations. Finally, a proactive public can increase the opportunity for firefighting resources to be successful through property preparation and in the event of a fire situation be prepared to leave the area for personal safety. Acting early was a key point in part of Ready-Set-Go.

Public Surveys

The steering committee updated the 2005 CWPP questionnaire to identify potential educational opportunities, gauge what citizens value most, and assess how those values may be threatened by wildfire. Two public surveys were made available to the public. One contained 24 questions designed to gain information regarding public knowledge of wildland urban interface, risk reduction activities and cost, and defensible space. The second one, a shorter survey of 12 questions, focused on the landowner’s assessment of their own property in terms of wildfire accessibility, structure vulnerability, and potential safety issues.

Outreach

The CWPP committee felt it important to integrate as many community members as possible in the planning process. Several communication mechanisms were used in an attempt to reach the largest possible number of people in the county. Local media outlets were found to be best source of information for encouraging community involvement.

The surveys were also uploaded into a web-based program called SurveyMonkey, an online survey development cloud-based company that provides free, customizable surveys. Venues utilized for public outreach included:

1. Distributing the surveys at the public meeting and collecting them prior to meeting closure
2. Newspaper articles were released with the link to the website where individuals could access the survey directly.
3. The link was posted on the Union County Emergency Services website with a one click access.
4. The link was also posted on Union County Emergency Services Facebook site where one click would take the individual to the survey.
5. Fire agencies providing survey handouts at their reception desks.
6. Email was also used in an attempt to reach as many people as possible.

In addition to community workshops, radio interviews, newspaper articles, the steering committee decided a website would also be an effective method for communicating with citizens throughout the evolution of the plan. Both the Union County and the La Grande ODF Office websites were used to communicate the opportunity to participate in the survey. (Survey form is located in Appendix L)

Unfortunately, once again participation was limited, with only 13 individuals participating in the survey. Due to low public representation, the results were noted and retained but cannot be used to reflect the community as a whole.

**Summary and Recommendations**

Several attempts were made to reach out and obtain local public involvement. The highest response came from the local fire response organizations within the rural departments. They provided valuable information both general and specific to meeting the needs of the CWS goals.

Local cooperators were less responsive to participation requests at the time of the meeting. However, in May a fire scenario simulation was conducted with local cooperators participating in some fashion. Feedback on the scenario indicated a new understanding of their role in wildfire events. This new knowledge may provide opportunity for reaching out to cooperators for additional input.

It is unclear why the majority of local community members were unresponsive to opportunities to interact with fire managers and CWPP committee members. Recommendations of potential new outreach mechanisms, such as hard copy mailing of letters or information booths at public events, could potentially draw further interest. Additionally, the 2015 fire season also resulted in fires close to local communities that likely resulted in a peak of public interest in how to they can be involved in the process. Perhaps a second round of surveys would result in a higher response.

Consideration of how to use other educational opportunities within communities may prove valuable. This could provide interaction from both fire response managers and local community members in a joint effort to meet the CWS goals. All stakeholders must be responsible for supporting communication, informing, and joining in the formal and informal communication networks across organizations (CWS 2014).

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