FIELD GUIDANCE
Identifying and Prioritizing Communities at Risk
Prepared by: National Association of State Foresters
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Purpose: To provide national uniform guidance for implementing the provisions of the "Collaborative Fuels Treatment" MOU, and to satisfy the requirements of Task e, Goal 4 of the Implementation Plan for the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy.

Intent: The intent is to establish broad, nationally compatible standards for identifying and prioritizing communities at risk, while allowing for maximum flexibility at the state and regional level. Three basic premises are:

- Include all lands and all ownerships.
- Use a collaborative process that is consistent with the complexity of land ownership patterns, resource management issues, and the number of interested stakeholders.
- Set priorities by evaluating projects, not by ranking communities.

References:

1. *A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and the Environment. 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy Implementation Plan.* May 2002. (Goal 4 Task e: "Develop nationally comparable definitions for identifying at-risk wildland urban interface communities and a process for prioritizing communities within state and tribal jurisdiction.") (Available at: http://fireplan.gov/reports).
2. *Memorandum of Understanding for the Development of a Collaborative Fuels Treatment Program.* January 13, 2003. (Available at: http://fireplan.gov/reports).
3. *Concept Paper: Communities at Risk.* National Association of State Foresters (NASF), December 2, 2002. (Available at: http://www.stateforesters.org/reports).
4. *Wildland/Urban Interface Fire Hazard Assessment Methodology*. NWCG, undated (circa 1997). (Available through the NWCG Publications Management System (PMS), NIFC Catalog number NFES 1597.)

Definition – Community at Risk: For the purpose of this document, a community is defined as "a group of people living in the same locality and under the same government" (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 1969). A community is considered at risk from wildland fire if it lies within the wildland/urban interface as defined in the federal register (*FR Vol. 66, No. 3, Pages 751-754, January 4, 2001).*

Approach:

1. Identify communities at risk (or alternately, landscapes of similar risk) on a state-by-state basis with the involvement of all organizations with wildland fire protection responsibilities (state, local, tribal, and federal) along with other interested cooperators, partners, and stakeholders. Alternately, in some locations this may be more easily done on a geographic basis through the already existing Geographic Area Coordinating Groups.

    - Using the 2000 census data (or other suitable means) identify all communities in the state that are in the wildland/urban interface and that are at risk from wildland fire, regardless of their proximity to federal lands. Ideally, the results of this effort would be displayed on a map or series of maps.
    - Develop state-specific criteria for sorting communities (or landscapes) into three broad categories (or zones) of relative risk, using the methodology described in the following section. A fourth category may also be included denoting little or no significant risk.
    - Prioritize the categories/zones as high, medium, and low. Alternately, a classification of very high, high, and moderate may be more appropriate depending upon fuel types. A fourth category may also be included denoting little or no significant risk.
    - Using the identified criteria, sort communities (or landscapes) into each of the three categories or zones of risk. The product may be map-based with lines or colors depicting the three zones on a map or series of maps. In this case, all communities that fall within the same zone would be classified as having an equivalent degree of relative risk. Alternately, in some states cooperators may choose to use a written document to display how communities have been classified, such as a simple spreadsheet or table. In this case, individual communities would be listed by name under one of the three previously identified categories of risk.
    - If there are land ownerships that cross state lines (for example Indian Reservations or National Forests), it is important to coordinate the risk assessment process with neighboring state(s) to ensure consistency in classification.
    - After completing the assessment process for a specific community, strongly encourage the development of a mitigation plan to reduce the identified risks to the community, particularly for communities in the higher risk categories.

2. Annually, using available mitigation plans or another similar analysis process, federal agencies, state agencies, and tribes will each examine the lands under their own ownership or jurisdiction and, with the involvement of all interested parties, identify high priority fuels reduction and ecosystem restoration projects that have the potential to reduce the risk to a specific community or communities.

3. Prior to May 1 of each year (beginning in 2004) state, federal, local, and tribal partners and interested stakeholders should meet to complete a joint program of work for the upcoming federal fiscal year. Jointly prioritize projects within each state using the collaborative process defined in the national interagency MOU "*For the Development of a Collaborative Fuels Treatment Program.*" Assign the highest priorities to projects that will provide the greatest benefits either on the landscape or to communities. Attempt to properly sequence treatments on the landscape by working first around and within communities, and then moving farther out into the surrounding landscape.

   [Note: In some of the larger states, this process may have to be initiated at the sub-state level first. The resulting lists of prioritized projects would then be reviewed by a state level collaborative group, who would develop the final joint program of work.]

   - First, focus on the category/zone of highest overall risk, but consider projects in all categories/zones. Identify a set of projects that will effectively reduce the level of risk to communities within the category/zone.
   - Second, determine the community's willingness and readiness to actively participate in each identified project.
   - Third, for each potential project, determine the willingness and ability of the owner of the land surrounding the community to undertake and maintain a complementary project.
   - Last, set priorities by looking for projects that best meet the three criteria above. In other words, assign a higher priority to those projects with the greatest potential to achieve a proper sequencing of treatments. Assign lower priority to projects where either the community or the surrounding landowner is unwilling or unable to actively participate. However, do not overlook opportunities around isolated, rural communities which may be at high risk, but not be organized well enough to effectively advocate on their own behalf.
   - Note: One reason for the collaborative priority setting process is the opportunity to identify complementary projects on adjoining ownerships which, if implemented, would provide a greater benefit to communities than if only a single project was implemented. However, nothing in this document is intended to prevent non-public landowners (such as Indian tribes) from implementing any project on their own lands, regardless of overall priority.

4. Annually document accomplishments both quantitatively and qualitatively.

   - Quantitative measures. Document accomplishments in accordance with the performance measures identified under Goal 4 in the *10-Year Comprehensive Strategy Implementation Plan* (page 15). However, the single most important quantitative reporting element is the number of

implemented projects that result in a significant and measurable reduction of risk to the communities and landscapes within the project area. In the longer term, it is important to document situations where a wildfire burned through an implemented project area, and determine how the treatment affected fire behavior.

- Qualitative measures. Document examples of successfully implemented projects using the guidelines previously distributed by federal agencies and the NASF for "success stories." These success stories will then be placed on both the NASF and the National Fire Plan websites as examples of how we collectively are reducing risks to communities.

Methodology:

Although there is no uniform national hazard or risk assessment process, there are a number of valid assessment processes that may work well in individual states or regions. In developing a risk assessment process for communities, use the NWCG publication *"Wildland/Urban Interface Fire Hazard Assessment Methodology"* as a reference guide. At minimum, consider the following factors when assessing the relative degree of exposure each community (landscape) faces. One effective approach is to map the four factors below using adjective ratings (high, medium, and low) and then overlay the maps to determine geographic areas of highest hazard, highest probability of fire occurrence, highest values being protected, and lowest protection capability.

- Fire Occurrence. Using historic fire occurrence records and other factors, assess the anticipated probability of a wildfire ignition in the vicinity of each community (or identified landscape) using an adjective rating system, such as high, medium, and low.
- Hazard. Assess the fuel conditions on the landscape and surrounding the community using a GIS mid-level mapping tool (if available) or other similar process. Again, apply an adjective rating to each specific area.
- Values Protected. Evaluate the human and economic values associated with the community or landscape, such as homes, businesses, community infrastructure (e.g. water systems, utilities, transportation systems, critical care facilities, schools, manufacturing and industrial sites, etc.) as well as high value commercial timber lands, municipal watersheds, and areas of high historical, cultural, and spiritual significance. As with the other factors, apply an appropriate adjective rating to each community or identified landscape.
- Protection Capabilities. Assess the wildland fire protection capabilities, including the capacity and resources to undertake fire prevention measures, of all agencies or organizations with jurisdiction: federal, state, tribal, and local. Again, apply an appropriate adjective rating. Consider using the Insurance Services Organization (ISO) rating for the community as an indicator.

SUMMARY:

Using the process described above, it is possible to assess the level of relative risk that communities in the wildland/urban interface face from wildland fire. This can then lead to an efficient process for prioritizing and scheduling effective fuel reduction projects. However, recognizing that the condition of the vegetation (fuel) on the landscape is dynamic, and that the resilience of communities to wildfire loss varies widely and changes over time, it is not only important and necessary to complete community assessments, but also to periodically complete reassessments. The frequency of reassessments, however, will vary considerably across the country depending upon fuel types and climate. We must remember that it is not only important to lower the risk to communities, but once the risk has been reduced, to maintain those communities at a reduced risk.

Further, it is essential that both the assessment process and the prioritization of projects be done collaboratively, with all agencies with fire protection jurisdiction – federal, state, local, and tribal – and interested stakeholders taking an active role.