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9. Facilitating Fire Safety in the Santa Monica Mountains over the Long Term¹

A Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) is only as effective as the community committed to implementing it over time. People in the Santa Monica Mountains region are fortunate to have multiple resources committed to fire safety over the long term and many aware citizens willing to contribute to this common cause. A federal publication on community actions to reduce wildfire risk sums up the ongoing task for citizens and governmental agencies:

“Communities across the country have invested countless hours and significant funds to develop CWPPs. Communities now have an opportunity to consider how these plans have helped reduce their wildfire risk, while also meeting state and national goals for wildfire risk reduction. Effective monitoring and evaluation of wildfire planning efforts at the local, state, and national level will provide important opportunities to evaluate the overall strategy of CWPPs in reducing wildfire risk and improving planning processes...

“A CWPP does not end when it is adopted; a thorough process should involve a continuous cycle of collaborative planning, implementation, monitoring, and adapting strategies based on lessons learned. As communities learn from successes and challenges during the development and implementation of their CWPP, stakeholders may identify new actions, propose a shift in how decisions are made or actions are accomplished, and evaluate the resources necessary for successful CWPP implementation.”²

9.1. Monitoring

Monitoring the results, i.e., evaluating project effectiveness, of CWPP-identified actions is vital to the ongoing success of these fire safety and prevention efforts. This process of monitoring or follow-up is how citizen groups and government agencies learn collectively if actions have been successful. If they are not, then strategies need to be readjusted moving forward. Some believe that monitoring is better left in the hands of government scientists. However, countless community-based organizations throughout the nation are demonstrating that the people who live in a place can be excellent local observers of that place. This is the concept of *community-based monitoring* that this CWPP promotes.

This CWPP was developed on the foundation of the collective experience of multiple resident and stakeholder participants, local data about the Santa Monica Mountains, lessons learned from Fire Safe Councils and CWPPs statewide, and the best available science. Given that community-level fuel reduction and fire safety is an evolving field—and learning to live with wildfire a long-term process—the necessity for adaptive management becomes apparent. Simply put, adaptive management is learning from mistakes and benefiting from successful efforts. It’s the reason for monitoring, which forms part of the database for future decisions.



Monitoring collective successes and failures thus will provide a better understanding of the effectiveness of actions proposed in this CWPP. It will also enhance residents’ ability to be responsible stewards of the native ecosystems in which they live. Evaluation of individual projects should bear in mind the main objectives of this CWPP to:

¹ For information regarding what to do after a fire, please see section 4.3.3 in Chapter 4, “Make a Plan to Be Better Prepared Next Time.”

² Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) Task Force and Wildland Fire Leadership Council, *Community Guide to Preparing and Implementing a Community Wildfire Protection Plan* (August 2008): p. 18. www.forestsandrangelands.gov/communities/documents/CWPP_Report_Aug2008.pdf.

- minimize ignitions,
- decrease fire intensity around homes and structures,
- decrease damage to natural and human assets,
- increase permeability (allowing fire to move through an area without destroying it), and
- increase resiliency.

Santa Monica Mountains residents have access to monitoring expertise throughout the ranks of local agencies, including the National Park Service, California State Parks, Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, the University of California, the Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains, and the Forestry Division of Los Angeles County Fire Department. These organizations can help Fire Safe Councils and others develop a monitoring strategy to track the long-term success of the projects identified herein, and ultimately this CWPP as a whole.



Additional resources and suggested frameworks for evaluation can be found online. One good example is the Ecosystem Management Initiative of the University of Michigan:

www.snre.umich.edu/ecomgt/evaluation/tools.htm.

Resources are becoming increasingly available for community-scale monitoring. A valuable online source can be found at the Partnership Resource Center:

www.partnershipresourcecenter.org/resources/monitoring-evaluation. This website explains some of the actions and data collection that local groups can undertake to monitor the effectiveness of both their neighborhood-level and larger

community-scale fire-safety efforts.

As stated in the quote on page 9-1, CWPPs are monitored on a national scale to evaluate their effectiveness in addressing the challenges of wildfire. A standardized format for participating in the national-level evaluation can be found at http://ri.uoregon.edu/documents%20and%20pdfs/eval_9-8-08_web.pdf. Fire Safe Councils, homeowner's associations, and other community-based organizations in the Santa Monica Mountains are encouraged to participate in this national-level monitoring program.

Ultimately, the true test of fire-safety projects is how they affect wildfire behavior, and how well local communities survive fire. When wildfire occurs, residents and agency partners will need to come together to evaluate which strategies were effective and which were not. From there, everyone can move forward together.

9.1.1. Project Monitoring

Project monitoring involves tracking all the stages of a project through completion, and often years later. To quote the national CWPP task force again:

“What Goes into Monitoring and Evaluating a CWPP Locally?”

- Only monitor what matters! (Communities may lack resources to engage in a long or complex monitoring process.) Community partners should identify key goals and objectives, and make decisions to monitor what is most important to the long-term sustainability of their CWPP.
- Track accomplishments and identify the extent to which CWPP goals have been met.

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- Examine collaborative relationships and their contributions to CWPP implementation, including existing participants and potential new partners.³
- Identify actions and priority fuel reduction projects that have not been implemented, and why; set a course for future actions and update the plan.”⁴

FIGURE 9-1. PROJECT TRACKING MATRIX at the end of this chapter provides a format for local groups to track project progress. It is based on a matrix developed by the El Dorado Fire Safe Council, and it can be reproduced in Excel to effectively track fire-safety projects over time.

Photo Point Monitoring

A simple monitoring method for fuel-reduction projects is photo point monitoring. This is a requirement for most California Fire Safe Council Clearinghouse grants. Photos are taken of a given place before, during, and after treatments, providing a basic physical comparison. An excellent guide to photo point monitoring methodology can be found at www.dep.wv.gov/WWE/getinvolved/sos/Documents/More/PhotoDocumentation.pdf.⁵



West Hillside Hazard Tree Project, Before.
Source: Ken Wheeland



West Hillside Hazard Tree Project, After.
Source: Ken Wheeland

Photo points are also an excellent visual method to help record changes and facilitate comparisons of areas before and after fire. It is useful to take photos as soon as possible following any fire event, then at successive, regular intervals, such as every six months or annually.

9.1.2. Ecological Monitoring

In addition to measuring the success of projects in reducing fuels and the negative impacts of fire, monitoring reveals how projects affect ecological processes and natural functions. From the outset, projects need to be designed to have minimal adverse ecological impact.⁶ The Conservation Principles identified in Chapter 1 provide guidance in minimizing such impacts. The Precautionary Principle is a basis for all actions in this CWPP: One can always do more, remove more, change more later. However, once an action is done, it is difficult—if not impossible—to undo it. Therefore, err on the side of caution, and take small steps.

³ For more information on collaboration resources, see the Red Lodge Clearinghouse, <http://rlch.org/content/section/4/27>.

⁴ CWPP Task Force et al. (2008), p. 18.

⁵ TAC Visual Assessments Work Group, The Clean Water Team Guidance Compendium for Watershed Monitoring and Assessment, State Water Resources Control Board (2001), “Standard Operating Procedure 4.2.1.4, Stream Photo Documentation Procedure.”

⁶ In addition to the Conservation Principles in Chapter 1, good information is available from several communities that are now developing best management practices for fuel treatments. For more information see www.myfirecommunity.net/Neighborhood.aspx?ID=666.

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It's always important to be aware of potential negative environmental impacts from projects. For example, when the shrub cover around a property is opened up, exposing more soil to sun, invasive weeds will likely enter areas where they had not been previously.

Most *ground-disturbing* projects promoted in this CWPP are focused on the areas immediately adjacent to homes. Therefore, providing procedures for landscape-level ecological monitoring is beyond the scope of this CWPP. Partnering agencies are conducting ecological monitoring throughout the Santa Monica Mountains to understand these impacts and determine if they are occurring. Interested residents can contact these agencies to learn about volunteer opportunities to assist in monitoring their local watersheds and beyond, or contact their local watershed groups to find out about community-based efforts.

9.2. Project Maintenance

Monitoring and follow-up evaluation of many similar efforts nationwide have shown that fuel-reduction projects require maintenance. Over time vegetation will grow back in fuel-reduction areas, infrastructure will change, and residents will move to and from local communities. Monitoring can inform our awareness of how much and what type of maintenance is needed.



At the homeowner level, maintenance often means walking around one's property and weeding and pruning. Remove all invasive weeds as soon as they appear, well before they develop a seed head that will allow them to spread. Look for any dead or dying leaves, branches, or other dead plant material and continually remove them, including cleaning plant debris from the roof and gutters. Ensure that any irrigation is directed specifically to desired plants and that it is not watering areas where invasive weeds could prosper. The more water provided to weeds, the more work is needed to remove them.

For larger-scale projects—such as at the neighborhood or community level—project maintenance strategies are most effective when designed into initiatives from the beginning. This is true for both the maintenance activities themselves and the continuing flow of resources (e.g. dollars and materials) to support them. Therefore, it is recommended that all projects undertaken from this CWPP include a maintenance component from the start. It will be the responsibility of landowners (including land management agencies) and/or local Fire Safe Councils and others leading a project to ensure that long-term project maintenance is included (and budgeted for) in all project implementation. As with any ground-disturbing project, environmental compliance and all other regulations must be met before undertaking a project and its necessary maintenance. *See Appendix G for more information on Environmental Compliance.*

9.3. Updating This Plan

No plan is ever permanent, especially in a rapidly changing field such as fire safety. This CWPP is based on current conditions in 2010 and best available information. New information will become available; there will be physical changes in the SMM communities in coming years. Therefore, it is vital to review this CWPP at least every five years and update it as needed.

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This CWPP was created in a binder format with MS Word documents to facilitate updating. Using this 2010 version as a basis, and the community meeting process described in Chapter 2, the plan could be updated relatively simply by partnering stakeholders. Updates would include monitoring reports and advances made by the community groups implementing this plan in their respective areas.

The Community Fire Safety Action Plans in Part II of this CWPP summarize recommended actions for each of the 20 planning units. As local groups (FSCs, homeowner's associations, and other community organizations) implement, monitor, and update CWPP activities in their neighborhoods, they can use the Project Tracking Matrix in this chapter to document their progress and the changes in their communities. When the CWPP is ready for updating, community groups can bring forward these changes to be incorporated into the revised Community Wildfire Protection Plan. This will facilitate an efficient collaborative review process.

Copies of this CWPP will be permanently available for public review at partnering agency offices, local fire stations, public libraries, and other locations throughout the Santa Monica Mountains region to facilitate increased resident participation over time.

9.4. Resources Needed to Support Ongoing Efforts

There are ample resources within the neighborhoods of the Santa Monica Mountains to implement many of the projects identified in this CWPP. What is missing in many cases is the community infrastructure to carry out the projects. The most effective way to implement a CWPP is through locally based organizations, i.e., residents who have a long-term vested interest in making their communities fire safe. Fire Safe Councils are a proven organizational structure for community members to join with agency partners to prepare their communities for wildfire.

As described in Chapter 1, there are several existing and/or new Fire Safe Councils (FSC) in the Santa Monica Mountains. These councils need to be strong, resilient, community-led efforts that will endure changes in politics and personalities. In other words, communities need to come together and develop the *social capital* to implement the changes they want to see for where they live. Expertise in wildfire and prevention is needed, and citizens can obtain assistance from agency partners, who can provide both knowledge of the fire-safety field and organizational development. Some of this is available through the California Fire Safe Council, Los Angeles County Fire Department, Ventura County Fire Department, and the National Park Service, which are leading efforts to build strong Fire Safe Councils in the Santa Monica Mountains. All stakeholder organizations are encouraged to assist these efforts. Support could also come in terms of training, education, and fundraising.



The planning units created for this CWPP may be logical geographical areas for creating a community Fire Safe Council. In some cases, existing homeowner's associations or other community organizations can become a FSC. In whatever form local residents decide to organize, the text in Part II of this CWPP and the Project Tracking Matrix at the end of this chapter can function as the basis or initial structure of a strategic plan. This can be further fleshed out by participating residents for individual neighborhoods and larger parts of the community. With a strong local base and a coherent plan for taking action, neighbors throughout the Santa Monica Mountains can use this CWPP to learn how to better coexist with wildfire, making their neighborhoods and the surrounding wild landscapes a healthy, resilient place now and into the future.

