



ENVIRONMENT

In the West, communities pioneer cooperative approach to fighting wildfires

PATHS TO PROGRESS

Instead of having understaffed towns try to do their own research in the middle of an emergency, the FAC Network offers a cooperative model where communities can share best practices and get help quickly.

Andy Nelson/The Register-Guard/AP | Caption



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SEPTEMBER 21, 2017 | LOS ANGELES — For Annie Schmidt it began in

2014, with a stranger on a bus.

Ms. Schmidt was in Colorado Springs for a workshop held by the newly created Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network, or FAC Net. On the way to a field trip, she found herself sitting beside Justice Jones of the Austin Fire Department, discussing his extensive work on post-fire recovery.

Later that summer, as the Carlton Complex Fire tore through 256,000 acres of north-central Washington, Schmidt, then-director of the Chumstick Wildfire Stewardship Coalition in Leavenworth, Wash., remembered the conversation and called Mr. Jones. “I said, ‘I need to know everything you know about recovery, like, yesterday,’ ” she says.

The information was a godsend for fire managers, who were stretched thin as hundreds of homes burned across Okanogan County, Schmidt says. “We didn’t have the time or resources to have materials developed instantaneously,” she says. “The ability to reach out and get some of these basic questions answered was huge.”

The network is a milestone in the nation’s changing attitudes toward wildfire, say fire management practitioners. Instead of waiting for the federal government or leaving understaffed towns try to do their own research in the middle of an emergency, it offers a cooperative model where communities can share best practices – empowering them to participate in developing their own resiliency to wildfire. “That’s a really big shift in terms of people trying to understand wildfires instead of just responding to them,” says FAC Net co-director Michelle Medley-Daniel.



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As climate change leads to hotter, drier summers, and populations grow in fire-prone regions, fire professionals have increasingly turned to strategies beyond suppression, or putting fires out as quickly as possible. “It’s almost a shelter-in-place mentality,” says Max Moritz, a specialist in fire ecology and management and a professor at the College of Natural Resources at the University of California, Berkeley. “If we’re going to see more events that are more extreme ... we’re going to have to learn to live in tune with the natural hazards of the environment where we are.”

Today FAC Net – born from collaboration among The Nature Conservancy, the US Forest Service, and The Watershed Center – consists of two dozen members, including fire departments, nonprofits, and conservation districts whose goal is to build relationships within and among fire-prone communities nationwide. Another 80 or so affiliate groups participate in workshops, access resources and tools online, and share with one another decades of wisdom around wildfire resilience.

When 'boots on ground' aren't enough

For the past century the responsibility of managing wildfires has fallen largely to agencies – such as fire departments, the Forest Service, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency – that have dealt with fires in a quasi-military fashion. The structured, hierarchical nature of that response ensured clear command structures and communication in efforts to put out fires.

But the past 20 years have seen fires grow increasingly catastrophic. Part of it was the build-up of small trees, shrubs, and other flammable

debris that turned some communities into tinderboxes – a result of 100 years of fire suppression. As the West’s summers grow hotter and drier, it has led to fire seasons that are as much as two months longer in states such as Montana.

At the same time, between 2000 and 2010 10 million new residences were built in the nation’s wildland-urban interface – communities that either border or are on fire-prone land. As of 2013, 36 percent of US homes stood in the WUI, according to joint research from the Forest Service, the University of Wisconsin, and Oregon State University.

We had to “dispel this notion that if we only had enough airplanes, engines, boots on the ground, we’d be good,” says Wendy Fulks, who facilitates FAC Net’s major partnerships. “We know now that’s just not going to work.”

Legislation such as the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 and the Federal Land Assistance, Management and Enhancement (FLAME) Act of 2009 catalyzed community preparedness efforts across the country. By the time FAC Net was formed in 2013, there was a growing sense among practitioners that they needed more innovative ways of living with fire – and that one way to do that was to involve more people in their work. The network brought together for the first time communities that had for years been working to address wildfire issues in relative isolation.

“So often, we fall into the same routine of having a problem in our place and thinking it’s just in our place,” Schmidt says. But while every community has its own unique challenges when it comes to wildfire, she notes, they also have plenty in common. “Not only can we learn from each other to get better results, we can create new things together,” she says. “In a capacity-limited, budget-limited world, [that]

is only the way we're going to tackle some of these big problems.”

Learning from others

The network introduced Schmidt and the Chumstick coalition in Leavenworth to the organizers of Project Wildfire in Deschutes County and Ashland Fire & Rescue in Oregon. Since 2015, the three organizations have been in constant contact and held what they call learning exchanges: essentially field trips meant to showcase each community's expertise.

The 2014 and '15 wildfire seasons, for instance, left Washington State with plenty of recovery experience to share. Businesses' ability to operate during and after a fire was a popular subject. “If you have a wildfire and only half the staff comes in, what's the plan to operate at that level? Or say you have a loss of a key member [of your organization]. Who's going to step in and run that business?” says Alison Green, program director at Project Wildfire.



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“It broadened out our thinking beyond just fuel-reduction projects and

firewise communities,” adds Ed Keith, county forester of Deschutes County.

Mr. Keith has in turn provided both Ashland and Leavenworth with advice on applying for the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s Pre-Disaster Mitigation Grant Program, saving them time and resources. “We were able to get a sense of how much work it would be and how effective it can be,” says Alison Lerch of Ashland Fire & Rescue. “We didn’t have to do everything anew.”

Chris Chambers, also from Ashland, recalls taking a tour of Wenatchee, Wash., following the summer of 2015, when embers from a nearby fire ignited sections of the city’s downtown. “Ashland has a similar topography, and it didn’t really cross my mind that it could impact our downtown area,” he says. “It was really eye opening for me.”

Getting the network off the ground had its challenges. Investing in relationships takes time and energy, and that’s a big ask of understaffed agencies facing a growing problem. The idea of a non-hierarchical structure can also be difficult to embrace for those used to dealing with top-down organizations, says Medley-Daniel, the FAC Net director. “It’s about accepting complexity ... and it continues to be hard to unravel what we need to do,” she says.

But for the most part, the benefits of being part of the network outweigh the trouble, FAC Net members say. The network’s online platform – which include a blog and a forum that works almost like Reddit for members – makes it easy for communities nationwide to ask advice of each other and share ideas. FAC Net also provides small grants, and its staff helps connect individuals and agencies with counterparts that can best help solve their problems. “So we have this

suite of efforts aimed at helping places move further down the road in changing their relationship with fire,” Medley-Daniel says.

It’s the personal bonds, however, that members say they value most.

“It’s the in-person relationships that makes you comfortable enough to pick up the phone and say, ‘I’m about to ask for your time and your help,’ and they’re more inclined to answer,” Schmidt says. “You’re a person to them.”

Material from Reuters was used in this report.

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