

Testimony of Dr. Kimiko Barrett
Senior Wildfire Researcher of Headwaters Economics
&
Member of the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission
Before the House Subcommittee on Federal Lands, Committee on Natural Resources
April 17, 2024

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to offer perspective on some of the themes in the draft legislation that is the topic of today's hearing.

I am Dr. Kimiko Barrett, Senior Wildfire Researcher at Headwaters Economics,¹ an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization based in Montana. We work on community development issues with local, state, and federal partners around the country. Our Community Planning Assistance for Wildfire² program—CPAW for short—has provided more than 75 communities with land use planning, technical assistance, and custom research to help them reduce wildfire risks. We also produce research and policy analyses for federal and local partners and create interactive tools to support data-driven decision-making—including wildfirerisk.org,³ a site created in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service designed to help community leaders understand and reduce their wildfire risk. We accomplish this work with support from the Forest Service and other federal agencies, private philanthropy, and community partners.

Over the last year-and-a-half, I also had the privilege of serving on the Congressionally established Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission.⁴ As you know, the Commission gathered 50 experts and representatives from federal agencies, the scientific community, the private sector, and Tribal governments. Our final report, published in September, offered close to 150 consensus-based policy recommendations to help Congress address the wildfire crisis. My contributions to the Commission drew from my expertise in risk-reduction strategies to homes, structures, and communities—what we largely reference as the “built environment.” My interest and expertise center on how we can proactively invest in safeguarding communities *before* a wildfire becomes a disaster.

At Headwaters Economics, we regularly see first-hand how communities are struggling to adapt to the wildfire crisis. The 75 communities we have partnered with include Grand County, Colorado, where we are helping local leaders integrate land use codes that are better adapted to real-world wildfire risks; Tuolumne Rancheria, a band of Me-Wuk Indians in California that is working on defensible space and home hardening strategies that are also culturally appropriate; and we played a key role in the efforts of Austin, Texas, to create a Wildland Urban Interface building code that could reduce risks while also meeting the unique needs and desires of that community.

It is not easy for any community, rural or urban, to bring together all the resources needed to adequately reduce the risks they face. For many communities, the need to comprehensively address wildfire risk exists alongside other pressing needs, such as housing affordability, transportation, and infrastructure development—testing local governments in unprecedented ways.

¹ Headwaters Economics is an independent, nonprofit research group whose mission is to improve community development and land management decisions. <https://headwaterseconomics.org/>

² Community Planning Assistance for Wildfire: <https://cpaw.headwaterseconomics.org/>

³ Wildfire Risk to Communities is a program of the U.S. Forest Service, created under the direction of Congress. It is available at <https://wildfirerisk.org>.

⁴ See the full Commission report here: <https://www.usda.gov/topics/disaster-resource-center/wildland-fire/commission>

The challenges of so many communities, coupled with the recent recommendations from the Commission, put a spotlight on the urgent new approaches to wildfire that are greatly needed in the United States. While there is no silver bullet, the Commission report lays out a roadmap of cross-cutting solutions that Congress can help realize.

I am grateful for the opportunity today to highlight three overarching themes in the Commission recommendations that will require your visionary leadership.

1. Be proactive rather than reactive

If reducing risks to people, businesses, and livelihoods is at the core of our goals, we must reach for proactive—rather than reactive—strategies. This will require a new focus on one area that has been sorely neglected: preparing our communities ahead of disasters.

For far too long we have focused on managing wildfires through suppression and hazardous fuels reduction while overlooking the built environment. Yet given the increasing pace, scale, and severity of wildfire risk, suppression and landscape treatments alone will not resolve this crisis. Our traditional focus on wildlands has failed to account for the critical role of home, neighborhood, and infrastructure design and construction. Just as communities are affected by this problem, so too are they part of the solution.

This theme is reflected in Recommendation #1 in the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission report, which calls for federal agencies to invest in the built environment through a Community Wildfire Risk Reduction Program. The Commission recommends creating an interagency coordinating partnership that would include the Forest Service, FEMA, the U.S. Fire Administration, the Bureau of Land Management, the National Institute of Standards and Technology, and others to bring together expertise in land use planning, building code adoption, and wildfire risk so we can holistically address the need to proactively harden our communities against wildfire.

A Community Wildfire Risk Reduction Program would also be able to provide multifaceted support for communities through technical assistance, direct grants, financial incentives, private-public partnerships, workforce training, subsidies for disadvantaged households, and capacity building—all necessary for community-scale mitigation. Communities cannot do this on their own. Without financial incentives and subsidies, a Community Wildfire Risk Reduction Program will not be successful.

By bringing together dozens of existing resources we can also significantly reduce the complexity and application costs that prevent many communities, especially those in rural or underserved areas, from being able to access federal programs.

Importantly, it is worth noting that this model has been adapted from a similar approach in managing and mitigating earthquake hazards to communities, specifically the National Earthquake Hazard Reduction Program.⁵ We do not need to reinvent the wheel when it comes to hazard reduction and resiliency. Important lessons from earthquake mitigation and other disaster preparedness efforts can be applied to wildfire risk reduction in communities.

2. Modernize tools for decision-making

To help communities quickly and effectively become better fire-adapted, we need modernized tools for decision-making. The Commission report (see Recommendations #104-106) calls specifically for the creation of a multi-agency “fire environment center.” Governed by a board of federal agencies with science and operational expertise, such a center should build on our nation’s existing and robust fire science and help integrate currently fragmented data and technology into one interoperable platform.

⁵ National Earthquake Hazards Reduction Program: <https://www.nehrp.gov/>

Modernizing our data and wildfire research systems can help communities access the best available science in real time so they are better equipped before, during, and after wildfires.

Complementary to supporting risk reduction to the built environment, a fire environment center would inform valuable decision-making strategies for risk reduction to the natural environment. Beneficial fire reduces fuels on the landscape and reduces risk to communities. The Commission recommendations specifically call for “dramatically increasing the amount of beneficial fire” on our landscapes.

While it is tempting to think we can mandate suppression of all fire, our national approach to wildfire should reflect the understanding that fire has an important role in our landscapes, fostering both healthy landscapes and reducing the risk of future wildfires. Calls to return to a 24-hour suppression policy are antithetical to allowing more beneficial fire, supersede local decision-making, and are in direct opposition to the Commission’s recommendations.

Fuel treatments and the use of beneficial fire will be necessary to reduce wildfire risk to communities and fire-adapted landscapes. Project permitting and planning, including processes like those required under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), are necessary to implement such projects. The Commission found that federal land management planning and permitting efforts and requisite environmental analyses are often not completed at a pace commensurate with the increasing impacts of wildfire. As a result, there is a need for funding to support permitting personnel for planning and analysis, as well as collaborative and inclusive partnerships in communities. Additionally, we need consistent, flexible integration of evolving wildfire science that can inform strategic investments on the ground. Any NEPA reform should not be done at the expense of the best available science, community engagement, local decision-making, and collaboration with partners.

3. Dedicated and sustained funding

Finally, visionary approaches require investments of dedicated and sustained funding. Given the transboundary nature of wildfire, adequate and continued support is needed at all scales and across disciplines.

Today, communities struggle to access limited funds spread across a confusing constellation of programs. The burden falls to local jurisdictions to navigate and piece together the limited programs that do exist in order to reduce risk to potential disasters. For example, Forest Service grants don’t currently support home hardening efforts, while some FEMA grant programs do. However, applying for and administering FEMA and other federal grants requires a level of staffing and expertise that is often out of reach for rural and underserved communities.⁶

In addition, current levels of funding for risk reduction projects simply are not enough. For example, in the first rounds of funding in the Community Wildfire Defense Grants (CWDG) program, created under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, requests for funding outstripped available dollars at a rate of four to one.⁷ In FEMA’s Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program, requests were more than double the available funding,⁸ and grants are overwhelmingly awarded to high-capacity,

⁶ Headwaters Economics. (2024.) A rural capacity map. <https://headwaterseconomics.org/equity/rural-capacity-map/>

⁷ Headwaters Economics. (2023.) Analysis of the first round of Community Wildfire Defense Grants. <https://headwaterseconomics.org/natural-hazards/cwdg-first-round/>

⁸ FEMA. (2023.) Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities Grant Program FY 2022 Subapplication and Selection Status. <https://www.fema.gov/grants/mitigation/building-resilient-infrastructure-communities/after-apply/fy22-status>

coastal communities.⁹ These programs are designed to be cost-effective—investing in projects that help communities avoid costly disasters.

If we are going to treat the wildfire crisis like the national emergency that it is, these programs should be funded consistently and predictably. There should be more funds available in streamlined ways so that more communities can access them. Investing in mitigation *before* disasters strike will yield large savings from avoided losses and is necessary to alleviate pressure on post-disaster federal programs, protect homes and businesses, and make communities safer and more prosperous.

Conclusion

The Wildfire Commission report provides the roadmap for future wildfire policy and a vision in which there is complimentary mitigation and management within both our communities and the wildlands that surround them. To be certain, our future will be one of increasing wildfires and the status quo cannot be maintained. We will have to learn to live with wildfires in the wildlands but that does not mean we have to experience disasters in our communities.

Thank you for your time and your attention to this urgent issue.

⁹ Headwaters Economics. (2023.) FEMA’s BRIC program continues to fund innovative risk reduction – but community capacity limits access. <https://headwaterseconomics.org/headwaters/femas-bric-program-continues-to-fund-innovative-risk-reduction-but-community-capacity-limits-access/>