

Washington Wildland Fire Protection Strategic Plan Update Addendum

Wildland Fire Advisory Committee
September 2024

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Washington Wildland Fire Protection Strategic Plan Addendum Update

Executive Summary

The [Washington State Wildland Fire Protection 10-Year Strategic Plan](#) was completed in 2018. The Wildland Fire Advisory Committee (WFAC) played a key role in the development of the Strategic Plan at that time, including vetting content and identifying the vision, goals, and outcomes.

In spring of 2023, 5 years into implementation of the Plan, the Washington State Forester requested the “assistance and input of the WFAC in determining progress achieving the goals and outcomes contained in Plan, and to develop an addendum to the Strategic Plan which contains the review of the progress made, any gaps and/or recommendations for amendments to the plan resulting from changes in conditions, rationale or drivers considered when the plan was developed”.

Key Findings and Recommendations

The Committee finds that the four goals of the Plan continue to be valid, and they chart the right course toward achieving the vision of the Plan, “All Washington – safely managing and living with wildland fire.”

The Committee believes that substantial progress has been seen with the implementation of the strategies needed to achieve the four goals of the Plan, but that it should be recognized that the Plan cannot be completed in the following 5 years. As such, consideration should be given to developing an update to the plan that continues to chart the course for the next decade.

WFAC believed all goals and strategies continue to be relevant and deserve continued attention and resources, but identified three key areas that if emphasized over the next five years may produce the greatest gains in achieving the vision of the Plan:

1. Preparedness, response, and recovery systems.
2. Landscapes resiliency
3. Community protection

In addition to key areas for emphasis, the WFAC also identified several related strategies that can support implementation of these areas of emphasis:

1. Provide leadership and coordination
2. Enhance and sustain a highly capable workforce
3. Advance sustainable funding
4. Expand programs and practices to manage fuels and vegetation
5. Establish and sustain fire adapted communities

The body of this addendum includes an assessment by members of the Committee of the perceived progress toward achieving the Goals of the Plan, and then identifies the specific Goals, Strategies and sub-strategies that the Committee believes warrant increased emphasis.

The members of WFAC, on September X, 2024, approved this document. This addendum, taken in concert with the 2014 National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy, is considered merged with the Washington State Wildland Fire Protection 10-Year Strategic Plan.

Purpose of This Addendum

The Washington State Wildland Fire Protection 10-Year Strategic Plan was completed in 2018. The WFAC played a key role in the development of the Strategic Plan at that time, including vetting content and identifying the vision, goals, and outcomes.

The Strategy is considered a blueprint for effective wildland fire protection in Washington and has been used to inform policy and resource development and allocation decisions. It is assumed that implementation and/or completion of individual strategies contained within the Plan represent progress toward achieving its overall goals and outcomes, fundamentally changing the future trajectory of wildland fire in Washington.

Plan Vision

All Washington—safely managing and living with wildland fire...

Working collaboratively across jurisdictional boundaries and with engaged communities, we safeguard what we value. All of Washington is adapted and prepared, and our landscapes are healthy and resilient. We prevent wildland fires, use fire where allowable, and safely suppress unwanted fire.

All Washington embraces an inclusive, cohesive approach to wildland fire management:

- All communities and landowners are engaged and supported to safely, effectively, and efficiently prepare for and react to wildland fire.
- All lands in the state are adequately protected with the right policies and protection strategies.
- All landscapes, not just forests, have a plan and sufficient resources to mitigate the greatest risks and deliver maximum benefits across landscapes.
- All agencies coordinate and communicate effectively, deploying their assets and capabilities in a manner that makes the best use of their resources and strengths.
- All people, no matter their language spoken, income level, origin, or background have access to quality information, at the right time, about wildland fire preparedness, prevention, response, evacuation, post-fire hazards, and recovery.

- All individuals—residents, land and property owners, and visitors—take responsibility for reducing risk from wildland fires and minimizing risks to others (i.e., from one community or property owner to another, or from HVRA owners to responders).
- All organizations encourage and embrace innovation, continuous improvement, partnerships, and locally based solutions in overcoming the challenges faced with wildland fire.
- All Washington works together to address the highest risks first—prioritizing communities and landscapes that are the most threatened and vulnerable.

Similar to the vision, the goals and outcomes established for this Plan reflect extensive stakeholder input as well as extensive discussions with the WFAC, DNR management, and senior managers from local, state, and federal wildland fire management agencies. These goals and outcomes align with the Cohesive Strategy, are closely linked to the vision, and provide the basis for the strategies and actions recommended in the Plan.

Goals

- Washington’s preparedness, response, and recovery systems are fully capable, integrated, and sustainable.
- Landscapes are resilient. In the face of wildland fire, they resist damage and recover quickly.
- Communities are prepared and adapted for current and future fire regimes.
- Response is safe and effective. There is zero loss of life of firefighters or the public, from wildland fires.

Outcomes

- Safety of the public and firefighters is provided for; wildland fire is suppressed when necessary and used where allowable.
- Unwanted human-related wildland fires are virtually eliminated.
- Costs to suppress wildland fires are reduced; risks and losses to communities and the economy are minimized.
- Communities and ecosystems are resilient and healthy; both can withstand and recover from wildland fire.

WFAC Tasking

This request for review of the Strategic Plan is being made because of the significant changes that have occurred since its completion in 2018. DNR's organizational structure, policies, procedures, and funding in the five years since the Strategic Plan was finalized have undergone substantial changes, many specifically called for in the plan. Examples include increases in available suppression resources and establishment of new programs such as Community Resilience and Prescribed Fire.

Nationally there has been dramatically increased focus on wildland fire management by two administrations and Congress with the passage of numerous historic funding bills, an amendment to the [National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy](#) by the Wildland Fire Leadership Council, and the commissioning of a forthcoming report of the Congressionally chartered [Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission](#).

The purpose of this task order is to employ the expertise, knowledge, and the constituent connections of the WFAC to help determine the extent of progress in achieving the goals and outcomes of the Strategic Plan, identify any recommendations for amendments to the Plan, and to provide the basis for development of future DNR program budgets and deliverable priorities. This review is critical to ensure the relevancy and effective implementation of the Strategic Plan.

With the support of DNR Wildland Fire Management Division and Region staff presentations and written information, the intent is to assist DNR by conducting a 5-year review of the Strategic Plan, providing an assessment of the extent strategies have been implemented, goals attained, and importantly, the anticipated outcomes achieved.

Specific tasks include:

- Review the strategies contained within the Strategic Plan and develop a request for information and data with which to evaluate the Plan, which shall be supplied by DNR staff.
- Assess the extent the strategies have been implemented and identify any gaps in implementation.
- Characterize the extent to which the goals of the Strategic Plan have been attained, and the anticipated outcomes achieved.
- Identify strategies that may no longer be relevant because circumstances have changed or that would now be ineffectual.
- Identify any new outcomes, goals, and strategies that are needed.
- Review and recommend metrics for DNR to measure progress toward achieving goals and outcomes.

Findings

WFAC found overall that the goals of the Plan are still valid. The Committee felt that the language of certain goals could be more descriptive of current values and practices, but this alone does not warrant changes at this time. The following is a synopsis of the Committee's review of the goals of the Plan.

Goal 1. Washington's preparedness, response, and recovery systems are fully capable, integrated, and sustainable.

- This goal is overly broad in scope but is still valid, and there is evidence of some progress toward achieving this goal. Implementation lacks true cross-agency and cross-partner coordination.
- Preparedness lacks scale and there is a sense by certain stakeholders that attempts by governmental agencies to collaborate are tokens rather than true collaboration.
- Wildland fire suppression response and coordination has improved. There is a perception that there are more resources available, and that those resources are being deployed effectively. The many issues related to firefighter recruitment and retention are seen as a barrier to sustaining effective wildfire response.
- Progress toward a fully integrated and sustainable post fire recovery system is seen as marginal. Recovery systems suffer from the lack of cross-agency and partner integration as well.
- Current metrics that seek to measure progress in implementation of Goal 1 are general in nature and not specific. As one example, the DNR operates under the standard of suppressing ninety-five percent of all fires on DNR's protection before they reach 10 acres in size. When this standard is achieved, it becomes the basis for the assumption that preparedness and response systems are capable in general but does not account for other response organization's preparedness and response capabilities.
- Other metrics that could measure progress toward improving the capabilities, integration and sustainability of preparedness, response and recovery systems are not well defined and published. This is true of activities related to community preparedness and recovery as well.

Goal 2. Landscapes are resilient – in the face of wildland fire, they resist damage and recover quickly.

- The Goal is valid, but the focus should be to emphasize ecosystem adaptation and resilience. The thinking being that "ecosystem resilience" better describes all the abiotic and biotic factors that need to be considered when mitigating impacts from wildfire. We want these landscapes to provide things like clean water, forest products, etc. Ecosystem health is directly related to resilience and a better measure to use.

- Work toward achieving Goal 2 is progressing, and cross boundary work has improved, but is not coherent at landscape levels and lacks coordination.
- Gaps in achieving full implementation include lack of funding for forest restoration, lack of a robust all-hands approach to prescribed burning that uses contractors and other qualified personnel, not strategically planning with private landowners for fuels mitigation treatments and not taking ecosystem services into account to achieve resiliency. (clarify what was meant by comments on “burn plans” and “air quality”)
- PODs and PCLs are being used but could be better utilized by incorporating them more broadly into community protection plans that reflect community identified values at risk and desired outcomes. Full integration of Washington’s PODs data into national databases such as the NIFC Enterprise Geospatial Portal to improve availability to fire managers.
- Increased accountability is seen as a critical need. It’s generally not clear who is responsible for achieving the elements of this goal, including coordinating with landowners to implement treatments and monitoring those treatments.
- There is a need to account for the population of the west side and letting the fire ecosystem go where it wants could be catastrophic. An ecosystem services approach gets us to a resilient landscape.
- Future metrics should include overlaying values at risk with treatment areas, and establishing a post fire evaluation and monitoring program that focuses on burned area severity and ecosystem services impacts.

Goal 3. Communities are prepared and adapted for current and future wildland fire regimes.

- Goal 3 is still valid, and progress is being made towards achieving the goal. The perception is that communities that have not experienced wildfire before are more aware now than a decade ago.
- Tribal communities need more assistance to prepare for wildfire. Very few Tribal communities have adopted Firewise. There is a high risk of impacts from wildfire within reservations because of insufficient building construction standards. Tribal communities are lagging behind other communities and have not significantly progressed on establishing adequate protection.
- There should be clear accountability for achieving this goal. This may include organizations other than DNR being accountable for outcomes.
- A potential barrier to the success of achieving the goal is a few communities being opposed to modifying adjacent forest fuels to reduce the wildfire hazard thereby increasing the risk to other community values. Because of this it may be necessary to

shift the focus in some communities to minimizing smoke impacts and preparing evacuation plans.

- To establish meaningful metrics and gauge success, the meaning of “community” must be better understood. Used in this context, community may be too broad as a descriptor. It may be important to identify specific cohorts and/or geographic boundaries as a means of focusing preparedness and adaptation activities and establishing accountability to achieve the desired effect. School district boundaries, census blocks, established Firewise Communities and islands are examples of geographic based communities, or cohorts could be established by age, ethnicity, military service, self-identification and a number of other parameters. It’s important to appropriately establish and use community-based metrics too. Some communities may inherently have fewer resources to engage in preparedness and adaptation activities and this would not necessarily be reflected in the data analysis. The process of identifying communities must have an end purpose. Communities, however defined, must be able to access and use the data for themselves.

Goal 4. Response is safe and effective.

- Excellent progress has been made toward this goal with the perception that wildfire response is more effective and safer since 2015.
- Coordination between the state, federal land management and local fire protection agencies has improved. There is a perception that the allocation and prioritization of response resources across jurisdictional boundaries continues to improve. The safety of firefighters and aircraft has received focused attention and the retention of firefighters, although an ongoing concern, has seen some improvement by addressing pay practices and assignment fatigue.
- Using the term “safe” to describe success in achieving the goal with respect to suppression response activities raises several issues. We cannot guarantee safety, we can only work to reduce risk, for which it’s perceived that significant progress has been made.
- Evacuation planning is recognized as an escalating need. A more unified approach for identifying lead organizations for planning and implementation of evacuations in response to wildland fire is needed.

Areas Recommended for Emphasis

The WFAC concludes that the Plan goals and strategies continue to be relevant and deserve continued attention and resources. Further, the Committee recommends that by putting further

emphasis on specific goals and strategies over the next five years, the greatest gains in achieving the vision of the Plan can be achieved.

Goal 1. Washington’s preparedness, response, and recovery systems are fully capable, integrated, and sustainable.

To fully achieve the outcomes envisioned in implementation of Goal 1, stakeholders will need to broaden the accountability for achieving the outcomes beyond just DNR. It will be necessary to work to gain better alignment of priorities and create strong incentives for all stakeholders to participate in the process. This includes developing priorities and budgets cohesively to ensure alignment. It also includes taking the time to develop shared metrics that measure progress toward improving the capabilities, integration and sustainability of preparedness, response and recovery systems.

Goal 1...Strategy 1

Provide leadership and coordination to guide implementation and facilitate agency alignment.

- **1.1 Convene a leadership forum to facilitate the development and alignment of agency efforts to achieve Plan goals.**
 - Establish a leadership forum that is fully inclusive of all agencies, Tribes and partner organizations engaged in wildland fire management to facilitate cross-organization coordination to achieve Plan goals.
 - Develop a 5-year implementation plan in collaboration with those organizations with the authority to implement actions in support of the plan that sets priorities and identifies resources to carry out implementation.
 - Establish an accountability matrix for goals and strategies among various organizations and partners.
 - Initiate policy discussions that elevate post-fire recovery planning and implementation.
- **1.2 Assign the WFAC the responsibility of providing advice on risk planning, prioritizing mitigation resources, and facilitating stakeholder engagement.**
 - Provide specific tasks to the WFAC to invigorate their role in providing guidance related to hazard and risk planning, wildfire mitigation and plan implementation.

- Task the WFAC to socialize hazard and risk models, including in both the built and natural environment, to account for variability in communities and human demographics.
- **1.3 Establish regional and local coordinating capacity.**
 - Establish the agency and partner capacity required for effective regional and local coordination to accelerate the implementation of goals and strategies.
 - Create robust fire-adapted community coordination between agencies, Tribes and partners.
 - Define local values at risk and establish organizational accountability to reduce that risk.
 - Prioritize funding and coordination so local fire protection organizations can carry out risk assessments and mitigation activities.

Goal 1...Strategy 3

Enhance and sustain a highly capable workforce.

- **3.1 Establish an interagency taskforce to determine the workforce needed for Plan implementation.**
 - Establish a taskforce tasked with a strategic assessment of wildland firefighting workforce needs for the next 5 years and making recommendations to address recruitment and retention.
- **3.5 Address retention and succession planning issues within the wildland fire workforce.**
 - Implement taskforce recommendations.
- **3.6 Provide effective training for the wildland fire management workforce. Focus on:**
 - Establish a streamlined interagency system that effectively coordinates access to higher-level training for Washington's firefighting workforce in support of the strategic assessment of workforce needs.

Goal 1...Strategy 4

Advance sustainable funding.

- **4.1 Building on the work undertaken for the JLARC study, establish the true costs of wildfire in Washington state to better inform resource allocation decisions.**

- Account for ecosystem resources losses and health impacts in addition to the built environment.
- Ensure broad collaboration with stakeholders including health departments and the insurance industry.
- **4.2 Identify and evaluate alternative sustainable funding mechanisms for resilience and wildland fire suppression.**
 - Task the WFAC with developing advice and recommendations for future funding priorities for suppression, community resilience and post-fire recovery.
 - Task the WFAC with providing recommendations for alternative funding mechanisms for achieving outcomes, including the potential for other private and government entities to fund activities to achieve outcomes.

Goal 2.

Landscapes are resilient – in the face of wildland fire, they resist damage and recover quickly.

For Goal 2, the Committee recommends a shift in focus to emphasize “ecosystem health” and restoring “fire adapted landscapes” when contemplating landscape-oriented wildfire mitigation strategies. Ecosystem health better describes breadth of abiotic and biotic factors that should be considered when mitigating impacts from wildfire. Landscapes should provide clean water, habitat, forest products and other functions. Ecosystem health is directly related to resilience and better describes the outcomes envisioned under Goal 2. To achieve the goal, increased and broader accountability is seen as a critical need. The Committee recommends clearly establishing which entities are responsible for achieving the elements of this goal, including coordinating with landowners to implement treatments and monitoring those treatments. It was also recommended that increased emphasis is placed on coordinating post-fire and long-term recovery.

Goal 2...Strategy 5

Expand programs and practices to manage fuels and vegetation.

- **5.2 Address and resolve barriers to managed natural and prescribed fire.**
 - Increase coordination with Tribes and partners to achieve strategic outcomes.

- Enhance cultural burning opportunities and work to remove barriers where they exist.
- Reduce risk of liability when prescribed burning.¹
- **5.3 Ensure coordination between Washington State’s 20-Year Forest Health Strategic Plan and Washington’s 10-Year Wildland Fire Protection Strategic Plan.**
 - Ensure Plans are well coordinated to achieve priorities and outcomes.
- **5.4 Develop and implement wildland fire mitigation and fuels treatment plans for non-forested landscapes.**
 - Support implementation of the WSRRI Long-term Strategy 2024 – 2054.
- **5.5 Develop and implement wildland fire mitigation, adaptation, and response policies and plans for at-risk landscapes and communities in Western Washington.**
 - Place an emphasis on Wildfire hazard education and cooperating with law enforcement and local emergency management on evacuation planning.
 - Task the WFAC to provide advice on how a changing wildfire hazard profile in western Washington may impact preparedness and community protection in the future.

Goal 3. Communities are prepared and adapted for current and future wildland fire regimes.

The Committee recommends making a priority of increasing the wildfire preparedness of Tribal communities. A gap in preparedness exists between Tribal and non-Tribal communities and with additional resources tribal communities are able to lead in adapting to their specific circumstances. And when preparing for impacts from wildfire, look at all impacts not just the high value, built environment.

Goal 3...Strategy 6. Establish and sustain fire adapted communities.

- **6.4 Facilitate adoption of land use plans, regulations, and codes that reduce wildland fire risk in the WUI.**
 - Work to amend the [Growth Management Act](#) to account for hazard and risk of wildfire.

¹ Look at California model for liability for Rx burning.

- **6.5 Mitigate incursions of wildland fire smoke into community airsheds.**

Moving Forward

In completing the assigned task, and through conversations held by the Committee, several key “take aways” emerged. There was a strong belief that accountability for achieving the outcomes of the Plan needs to broaden to include not only state and federal organizations but local agencies, communities, Tribes and non-governmental organizations. Each person, community or organization that may be impacted by wildfire needs to understand and accept a share of the responsibility to achieve the outcomes. This will require more communication and planning, as well as a more cohesive approach to priority setting and resource allocation.

Taking a more holistic view of the wildfire crisis was seen as a critical component of the success of the Plan. This includes closely connecting all elements of the wildfire cycle from prevention to recovery and accounting for all the ecosystem related risks from wildfire not just the risks to the high value, built environment. These elements are deeply interrelated and represent the framework for individual and community engagement in achieving the Plan outcomes.

Finally, the wildfire crisis requires a crisis management approach with clear leadership intent, planning, resources and execution. The Plan provides the framework but requires bold action by all those impacted by wildfires to achieve the vision of all Washington - working collaboratively across jurisdictional boundaries and with engaged communities, safeguarding values, adapted and prepared for wildfires, and with healthy and resilient landscapes.