Youth-Engaged Fire Futures:

Learning from Listening Circles with Young People to Inform Fire Workforce Development

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About the Ecosystem Workforce Program:

The Ecosystem Workforce Program is a program of University of Oregon's Institute for Resilient Organizations, Communities, and Environments. We conduct applied social science research and extension services at the interface of people and natural resources. Our publications aim to inform policy makers and practitioners and contribute to scholarly and practical discourse.

More information: https://resilient.uoregon.edu/ewp/publications

About FireGeneration Collaborative:

FireGeneration Collaborative (FireGen) aims to reimagine and transform fire culture, community governance access, and equitable solutions by centering Indigenous leadership and diverse young generations. More information: https://www.firegencollab.org/

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Photo credit: Meredith Jacobson.

Overview

Young people are the future of wildfire response, community adaptation, and landscape resilience workforces, and will inherit the impacts of today's fire policy and investment decisions. In the fire field, policymakers and practitioners often make decisions on behalf of the "next generation" without engaging young people themselves in shaping those decisions. In contrast, youth-led political action, including policy advocacy and community organizing, has often been a vital catalyst for social change. This working paper reports results from listening circles that engaged young people (ages 16 to 30) in sharing their experiences in the fire field, desires for their futures working with fire, and ideas for making change. These listening circles revealed high demand among young people of diverse backgrounds for jobs in fire that pay a living wage, offer good benefits, are guided by Indigenous and place-based leadership, and foster an inclusive workplace culture centered around care and wellbeing. They also revealed the need for clear, inclusive on-ramps for young people to get involved in the fire field via K-12 education, training, and community-building programs.

Recent research and policy syntheses highlight a need to scale up workforce capacity to respond to wildfires, cultivate landscape resilience, and maintain fire-adapted communities[1]. Scaling up capacity will require engaging more young people from more diverse backgrounds, including from across rural and urban geographies, varied educational and class backgrounds, as well as LGBTQIA+[2], BIPOC[3], and other identities historically excluded in the fire field.[4] Scholars and practitioners are also increasingly emphasizing the need to recenter Indigenous sovereignty and leadership in fire management, including fire workforce development.[5] The continued exclusion of Indigenous fire stewardship and prioritization of fire suppression has hindered social-ecological resilience, severed intergenerational fire knowledge-sharing, and intensified hazardous labor conditions.[6]

Responding to these needs, FireGeneration Collaborative (FireGen) designed this project following participatory action and Indigenous methodologies to mobilize research as a means of enacting change, building relationships, and sharing stories.[7] Our research team oriented toward workforce development as an opportunity not only to recruit more young people into existing fire employment structures, but to reimagine those structures and foster positive relationships between people, fire, and land. "Youth-Engaged Fire Futures" is one part of FireGen's collaboration with Ecosystem Workforce Program that employed a variety of approaches to explore the question: **What does (re)creating good livelihood systems for fire-resilient communities and landscapes look like?**

[1] *ON FIRE: The Report of the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission; Trefny, K., Law, A., Huber-Stearns, H., Courtney, K., Machado, M., Varney, A., & Reed, R. (2026). Fire Paths: Advancing Fire Resilience Workforces, Careers, & Livelihoods in the Western U.S. EWP Working Paper 126. University of Oregon, Eugene.*

[2] *LGBTQIA+ is an abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and more.*

[3] *BIPOC is an abbreviation for black, indigenous, and people of color.*

[4] *Varney, Abigail, and Cassandra Jurenci. 2024. Stanford Climate & Energy Policy Program. "Building a Robust and Representative Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Workforce."*

[5] *Intertribal Timber Council. 2024. Workforce Development Strategic Plan '23-'28.; Gutierrez, Stephanie. 2023. Building a Tribal Forestry Workforce in the Pacific Northwest & Beyond. Ecotrust.; Clark, Sara A., Andrew Miller, and Don L. Hankins. 2021. Good Fire: Current Barriers to the Expansion of Cultural Burning and Prescribed Fire in California and Recommended Solutions. Lomakatsi Restoration Project Inter-Tribal Indian Youth Service Corps.*

[6] *Martinez, Deniss J., Bruno Seraphin, Tony Marks-Block, Peter Nelson, and Kirsten Vinyeta. 2023. "Indigenous Fire Futures: Anticolonial Approaches to Shifting Fire Relations in California." Environment and Society 14(1):142–61; Long, Jonathan, and Frank Lake. 2018. "Escaping Social-Ecological Traps through Tribal Stewardship on National Forest Lands in the Pacific Northwest, United States of America." Ecology and Society 23(2).*

[7] *Cornish et al (2023), Wilson (2008), Kovach (2009), Tachine, Bird & Cabrera (2016).*

Approach

We organized listening circles with 70 young people (ages 16-30) across western Oregon and northern California[8] (Figure 1). Differing from focus groups, our approach to listening circles drew from Indigenous sharing circles[9] and community listening sessions.[10] We emphasized relationship-building, open storytelling, and participant involvement in shaping the research process. For each listening circle, over a meal, team members guided a 1.5-2-hour conversation **about interests, experiences, challenges, and desires in the fire workforce,** broadly defined.

We recruited fire-focused high school, community college, and university students, wildland firefighters, and fire practitioners through FireGen's network and partners, supplemented through snowball sampling, where we asked participants to identify others to potentially include. Two or three team members facilitated each listening circle of 2-12 participants. We held two listening circles for high school students, hosted at their schools, one circle for Indigenous participants, one virtual circle for participants from rural backgrounds, and two circles for BIPOC participants (one in-person and one virtual). The remaining six circles were open to participants of all identities. Given our recruitment methods, participants tended to share some overlapping interest with FireGen's goals of transforming fire policy and culture. We audio recorded each listening circle, transcribed the recordings, and qualitatively coded the transcripts. We gave participants multiple opportunities to review our writing to ensure we adequately represented their perspectives. For participants whose quotes we included in the key findings (below), we assigned native plant names as pseudonyms, giving participants the chance to choose a different pseudonym and add additional identifiers if desired.

Figure 1. Student or employment status of listening circle participants. *Note that 11 participants indicated both student status and working in the fire field.*

Student or employment status	# of participants
High school student	15
Community college student	8
4-year university student	25
Graduate student	5
Working or has recently worked in the fire field	28

Key findings

What pathways are young people following into fire work?

Understanding effective pathways and entry points into fire career paths is vital for informing workforce development. Our participants became interested in fire through diverse avenues: high school experiential learning programs, family or friends working in wildland firefighting, cultural connections to fire through Tribal communities, college courses that covered fire ecology, or awareness of wildland firefighting as a structured career path. Many participants were motivated to engage with opportunities for change by childhood experiences with devastating wildfires. Some felt that working as a prescribed fire practitioner was a way they could act on climate change or be a part of ecosystem renewal. Others desired the physical challenge, crew camaraderie, and travel opportunities that come with wildland firefighting. Indigenous participants particularly wanted opportunities to support their respective Tribes' cultural fire traditions.

[8] *Research protocol approved under University of Oregon Institutional Review Board Study 00001193.*

[9] *Tachine, Amanda R., Eliza Yellow Bird, and Nolan L. Cabrera. 2016. "Sharing Circles: An Indigenous Methodological Approach for Researching With Groups of Indigenous Peoples." International Review of Qualitative Research 9(3):277–95.*

[10] *Ardoin, Nicole M., Rachelle K. Gould, Deborah Wojcik, Noelle Wyman Roth, and Matt Biggar. 2022. "Community Listening Sessions: An Approach for Facilitating Collective Reflection on Environmental Learning and Behavior in Everyday Life." Ecosystems and People 18(1):469–77. doi:10.1080/26395916.2022.2101531.*

When asked how they secured their first fire-related position, participants named the following different pathways:

- Entry-level positions on wildland firefighting crews with contracting companies or agencies
- Corps or apprenticeship positions such as with Grizzly Corps, AmeriCorps, and Fire Forward
- Training opportunities in prescribed and/or cultural fire such as that offered by the Tribal EcoRestoration Alliance, Watershed Research and Training Center, and Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges (TREX)
- Community college courses and training programs in wildland fire and fire ecology
- University courses in fire ecology, especially ones with applied field experience
- College-connected prescribed fire internships and summer crews

These represented effective pathways for participants but also presented challenges. Those who started their career in wildland firefighting struggled to access the educational credentials to move up the ladder or access their desired position. Those who had started in college lacked hands-on, field experience but wanted a salary that reflected their educational credentials and allowed them to live in high cost of living areas. Additionally, while participants described existing educational, training, and apprenticeship programs in fire as beneficial, some participants voiced that there are not enough permanent jobs waiting for people coming out of those opportunities. Juniper, a participant involved in a Native-led workforce development initiative, described a mismatch between the training they provide to Native youth interested in fire stewardship, and the available jobs waiting for them afterward:

"A lot of the money and enticing offers come from those seasonal jobs that don't necessarily support Native visions, or Native perspective. And they have that military mindset that can be detrimental to people's health and wellbeing. And it's hard for me, working with workforce development in a rural community to try to train people to get into this world, and then we want to obviously hook them up with a career path so they're not just receiving this training…. But in this area, the main hiring is through those Western agencies… that put you at the bottom of the hierarchy when you get there, and don't necessarily respect you." – Juniper



A wildland firefighting crew hikes through a recently burned forest. Photo credit: Kyle Trefny.

Barriers and desires for change in the fire workforce

Participants shared stories about challenges and barriers they have faced in pursuing a career in fire management, and desires for future fire work. We identified seven linked barriers and desires that participants emphasized across listening circles.

From bureaucracy and hierarchy to worker agency

"You can't have somebody in DC who's never been on a fire in California making decisions about fire in California, that doesn't make sense. And you also can't have somebody in an office in San Francisco making those decisions, or in Sacramento... it has to be a requisite of people making decisions that they do some sort of field work, or go out to field days or interact with [fire]. And it's somewhat baffling to me that it's not an expectation and a structure." – Spirea

Across political orientations, rural/urban backgrounds, and levels of education, participants shared frustration with hierarchical, bureaucratic, top-down systems where workers lack agency in shaping their working conditions or the management decisions that guide their labor. Some participants lamented the bureaucratic systems that prevented them from responding immediately to a wildfire or community need. Others said their supervisors shut them down when they tried to advocate for updated equipment or more inclusive protocols. Spirea's quote reflects a disconnect between field or manual labor and planning and decision-making, a disconnect that came up in several contexts across conversations. Participants shared a desire for jobs that merged office and field work, combining first-hand knowledge of the landscape with management planning. This also implies that front-line workers should have more power to act upon their knowledge and experience of the landscapes where they live and work.

From unstable, hazardous working conditions to sustainable livelihoods

"I'm not positive about my future of wildland fire because it is seasonal, I don't want something seasonal. I want a job that will be forever. So I am currently looking into city/rural structural protection." – Yew

"Yeah the dream job would be... to just be able to go home at the end of every day."
- Larkspur

Reflecting past research and policy advocacy around the fire workforce[11], participants emphasized that low pay, lack of sufficient benefits, health hazards and lack of hazard pay, mental and emotional health tolls, and the precarity of working seasonal and temporary jobs all represent key challenges that make it hard to envision a long-term career in the fire field. Some participants shared that they wish they could be involved in year-round stewardship that would allow them to maintain place-based relationships.

From colonial values to Indigenous-led and ecological stewardship

"I want more exposure to places where the authority I'm deferring to isn't necessarily part of the suppression culture. I want to learn from Indigenous people... the knowledge exists, and it's existed, and so I would like to be exposed to spaces where I'm receiving that. Because most of what I hear about is colonial fire practice, and I don't think that that's sustainable going forward. So I don't know what that looks like, and I know funding is complicated, but I would be more encouraged to participate if I respected the knowledge and the authority that I was under." - Currant

Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants alike expressed a desire to work for Tribes and on place-based stewardship that follows Indigenous leadership. Some Indigenous participants noted that they do not want to work for

[11] See Varney, Abigail, and Cassandra Jurenci. 2024. Stanford Climate & Energy Policy Program. "Building a Robust and Representative Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Workforce."

federal or state agencies due to historical and ongoing management practices that undermine Indigenous sovereignty and stewardship. One participant noted that this choice comes with a trade-off, as federal and state jobs often offer higher wages, better benefits, and more stability than jobs with Tribes or Indigenous-led organizations. Many participants, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and including wildland firefighters and fire practitioners, expressed a desire to move beyond colonial values and worldviews that guide fire suppression work. Participants discussed how colonial fire management creates an antagonistic relationship between people and fire, and fosters extractive relationships with land and other species. These comments imply that investment in Tribally-led workforce development is vital for Tribal youth particularly, but will also benefit non-Tribal youth. Many participants similarly emphasized the importance of land return to Tribal nations and shifting power to Tribes in fire management.

From exploitative, unhealthy conditions to care at the center

"I guess to summarize a lot of what we've said would be, care more about the people. Care more about the workforce. If you want firefighters, care for them. If you want people to be able to implement all these different plans and practices that are necessary, you need to take care of them. It just goes all the way down to the base of making sure we have everything we need. Bringing in the healthcare questions, bringing on the mental health questions, the long-term health of our bodies, our lungs, chemicals, we're around them all the time."
- Tarweed, Two-spirit fire practitioner

Participants expressed that the hierarchical structure of wildland fire suppression treats workers as an expendable resource, with workplace structures and social dynamics fostering a culture that fails to center health and wellbeing. While participants noted that prescribed fire work is less intense than wildland firefighting, some felt that a culture of ignoring physical and mental health carried over from fire suppression. While some young people choose to endure these challenges because they are passionate about the work or need the money, some participants commented that this culture excludes people of differing abilities who otherwise have much to offer and contribute. Further, some shared that it was hard to imagine a long-term career in fire due to the toll it would take on their body. Many participants, like Tarweed, used the word "care" in their vision for the future fire workforce. Some drew connections between the need to care for landscapes, care for communities, and care for workers. One participant brought up that good workplace culture involves joy and laughter. Another shared that they want to work on teams large enough to allow for collaborative (rather than solo) fieldwork and that afford more flexibility to take needed physical or mental health days. Such shifts could support a workplace culture that avoids burnout and fosters long-term wellbeing.

From identity-based exclusion to welcoming culture

"I work for [a contracting company], and I really like their culture. When we start each fire, before we go out to the fire, we circle up. They always make sure if people want to share their pronouns there's space for that. And the crew bosses are always like, 'we don't tolerate sexism, homophobia, racism here.' And I really appreciated being a part of that company culture in fire, and so that was really cool … it made me just feel a lot more comfortable in the fire space and getting to do wildland firefighting. So that's how I got into it, and then I want to keep doing it." - Hemlock

"I was on a queer crew in the summer for conservation. That was great. That was wonderful. But then when we met up with other crews, like, we were immediately bullied. So, it's great that you have an affinity space for these people. But then when you go into the broader field, you get dogged on. Same thing with other crews. I think we just need a more accepting society, which… it's hard to implement that, but I think that's just where it starts."
– Columbine

Participants of both underrepresented and highly represented identity backgrounds expressed a desire to work on diverse teams and foster a more inclusive and welcoming culture within fire management work. Several participants referred to a pervasive "macho" culture that they had either experienced working in fire or had dissuaded them from pursuing employment in fire. Many participants highlighted that the fire field is white, male, and cisgender-dominated, and some LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC-identifying participants shared that a lack of representation made them feel isolated or uncomfortable. Some participants, like Hemlock, found that intentional, inclusive practices at the crew-level made a big difference in shifting their experience. Others, like Columbine, expressed that broader, structural changes are needed across the culture of the fire field and beyond. This theme intersected with challenges and tradeoffs around precarious or unstable work (discussed above): some participants felt they had to choose between a stable job with good pay and benefits vs. a job with inclusive workplace culture but worse pay, fewer benefits, and less stability.

From unclear, confusing pathways to transparent and intentional on-ramps

"One thing which can be applied to a lot of subjects is ease of access, or ease of just getting started, because a lot of times you need to know the right person, you need to get recommended something, to get that first foot in the door. And getting that foot in the door can be really difficult sometimes, even just finding the right place to start can be somewhat difficult to find." – Honeysuckle

While our listening circles gathered young people who had found their way into the fire field or an educational path, many participants, like Honeysuckle, reflected that it was hard to navigate bureaucratic wildland firefighting hiring processes or break into fire resilience work without an inside connection. Some participants who learned about fire ecology in college wished they had exposure when they were younger, such as in grade school. Others who started their careers in wildland firefighting wished they had known about educational programs, such as community college fire programs, sooner so they could work their way up the ladder and secure a higher paying position. These experiences speak to the need for transparent, intentional pathways such as through K-12 fire education, university and community college career centers and fire training programs, and place-based hubs to learn about job opportunities. More transparent pathways could engage young people who may lack the personal or social networks to expose them to the fire field.

From fear to empowerment and knowledge

"When I was young in elementary school, they did a visit to the first prescribed burn…There were three of us who went up in the hills and watched fire be put on the ground and learn as the fire was right behind us. We were learning about what it meant and what plants are actually there to help preserve at the time of year. Being in this space and learning on the ground was more influential than learning in the books. I would like to help…. repeat that cycle, helping more generations."
– Salmonberry

Many participants shared that they grew up with fear of wildfire. In particular, one group of high schoolers had experienced devastating wildfire impacts on their community in recent years. Despite taking a fire ecology course in school, most of these students had negative associations that deterred them from pursuing a career with fire. These students had experienced some fire ecology curriculum but wished it had covered more practical elements of wildfire preparedness. Some participants, like Salmonberry, reflected that holistic fire education, especially with a field component, had a major positive impact on their relationship with fire and felt that positive, holistic, and proactive fire education should start in elementary school. Many participants were pursuing education or employment in the fire field because they wanted to transform fear into action that helps communities live with fire, and believe in education that empowers young people with knowledge and exposure to do the same.

Implications for policy and investment



Students on a fire ecology field trip in Oregon. Photo credit: Meredith Jacobson.

Participants brought up many prevailing fire workforce issues that workers, organizers, and researchers have documented over decades, affirming that these are still issues that affect some young people's career decisions. Ideas shared in listening circles covered all eight of the broad categories of actions identified in the PATHWAYS framework, which draws from literature review of 50 fire resilience workforce assessments (Trefny et al., 2026[12]). These categories represent interconnected needs and actions to advance sustainable livelihoods with fire:

- **P**ay: Strengthen pay, parity, labor standards, and enforcement
- **A**gency: Foster empowering workplaces and governance structures
- **T**rajectory: Expand robust recruiting, education, training, and career paths
- **H**ealth: Ensure housing, healthcare, retirement, and family benefits
- **W**ise: Develop actionable workforce research and data systems
- **A**nchored: Prioritize Indigenous and place-based systems
- **Y**earslong: Provide sustainable, accessible, and flexible funding
- **S**table: Secure dependable government capacity and balanced priorities

Beyond the recommendations outlined in more detail in the Fire Paths report, our research team compiled specific recommendations for the following areas that listening circle participants discussed in depth:

1) Implement robust K-12 fire education

2) Expand apprenticeship, corps, and training programs

3) Create youth-centered community spaces

(Dimensions of these recommendations are elaborated on page 11.)



[12] *See Trefny, K., Law, A., Huber-Stearns, H., Courtney, K., Machado, M., Varney, A., & Reed, R. (2026). Fire Paths Advancing Fire Resilience Workforces, Careers, & Livelihoods in the Western U.S. EWP Working Paper 126. University of Oregon, Eugene. https://resilient.uoregon.edu/ewp/fire-resilience-futures*

Implement robust K-12 fire education with...

- **Connections** between schools and Prescribed Burn Associations and/or fire practitioners, including field trips where young people can experience beneficial fire use.
- **Curriculum** that:
  - is required for all students and/or integrated into general education.
  - is led or informed by local Tribes and Indigenous knowledges.
  - provides understanding of fire ecology, history, and current challenges and solutions.
  - supports wildfire preparedness, including evacuation planning and home readiness.
- **High school career connections** including:
  - employer visits to learn about job opportunities in fire.
  - training programs including summer internships to gain skills and credentials.



Students on a field trip learning about fire ecology in Eugene, OR. Photo credit: Meredith Jacobson.



Fire practitioners watch testing fire on a prescribed burn at OR TREX event. Photo credit: Annabelle Law.

Expand apprenticeship and training programs through...

- **Training opportunities** that:
  - are paid, to ensure equitable access.
  - emphasize skills in beneficial fire and suppression.
  - are accessible to people of differing physical abilities.
  - partner with community colleges and universities.
- **Active recruitment** beyond word-of-mouth networks, such as through schools and community, career, and cultural centers.
- **Designing programs** attentive to people's varied skillsets from academic and fieldwork backgrounds, and fostering shared learning across these backgrounds.
- **Fostering pathways** from seasonal to permanent career positions, and providing fire career planning tools and resources.

Create youth-centered community spaces such as...

- **Physical centers** - locally and/or publicly owned and run - that provide fire education including career connections, and can serve as a space for place-based community-building.
- **Organizing spaces** - physical or virtual - where young people can gather to share experiences and discuss ideas for change-making.
- **Identity-based spaces**, such as within Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges (TREX), work crews, and schools and colleges, to allow young people to connect with others who share their identities (i.e. LGBTQIA+, BIPOC, Indigenous, and disability-focused spaces).
- **Political education venues**, particularly around labor rights, union organizing, and cooperative business development.



Participants in a youth-led fire conference workshop discuss experiences and aspirations. Photo credit: FireGeneration Collaborative.



Fire practitioners at a Learn and Burn day in California. Photo credit: Annabelle Law.

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