

Catalyzing Wildfire Risk Reduction

Key Findings and Implications from the Early Implementation of the U.S. Forest Service's Wildfire Crisis Strategy

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Michelle Greiner, Jess Downey, Heidi Huber-Stearns, Courtney Schultz, and Jesse Abrams

In 2022, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS or Forest Service) launched the Wildfire Crisis Strategy (WCS) to address wildfire risks to critical infrastructure, protect communities, and improve forest resilience across 21 priority landscapes. Collectively, these landscapes span ten western states and encompass a mix of land jurisdictions, including the National Forest System, other federal lands, Tribal, State, municipal, and privately owned lands. Under the WCS, the USFS reported various accomplishments, including, for example, the reduction of wildfire risk to \$700 billion worth of housing in these landscapes and treatment of approximately 1.86 million acres since their establishment in 2022 and 2023¹.

The WCS resulted from a historic investment of federal funding in wildfire risk reduction through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), also known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and from the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA). From these bills combined, \$2.6 billion was allocated to the WCS to increase the scale and pace of forest treatments on national forestlands and adjacent landscapes.

The WCS accompanies a suite of policies designed to facilitate and expedite forest treatments. For example, the USFS Shared Stewardship Strategy of 2018 emphasized partnership with the states, Tribes, and other collaborators to identify priority areas for management, coordinate work across jurisdictions, and leverage diverse capacities. The WCS built upon Shared Stewardship and other existing efforts, which we discuss herein. There are currently new efforts to revitalize Shared Stewardship that will incorporate actions taken under the WCS.²

To accomplish this landscape-level work, the Forest Service has come to rely on partners, including state forestry and natural resource agencies, NGOs, other federal agencies, county governments, and federally recognized tribes. Considering that non-USFS partners are expected to perform functions traditionally performed by the USFS, it is timely to investigate how WCS landscapes have relied on partnerships for implementing cross-boundary forest treatments.

In 2023-2024, our research team interviewed 51 individuals involved with WCS implementation to understand: how projects are leveraging existing authorities and partnerships, initial progress on the landscapes, and key challenges and opportunities with the strategy. We conducted case studies on four WCS priority landscapes that were leveraging prior work under Shared Stewardship agreements including the Enchanted Circle (New Mexico), Mount Hood Forest Health and Fire-Resilient Communities (Oregon), Wasatch (Utah), and the Sierra and Elko Fronts (Nevada). Table 1 shows the distribution of land ownership across each case study.

¹ USDA Forest Service. 2025. Confronting the Wildfire Crisis. FS - 1187h. Available from: https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/fs_media/fs_document/WCS-making-difference.pdf

² Shared Stewardship. USDA Forest Service. Available from: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/working-with-us/shared-stewardship>

Table 1. Case Study Characteristics

CASE STUDY	ENCHANTED CIRCLE	MT. HOOD	WASATCH	SIERRA & ELKO FRONTS
Land ownership*	Carson National Forest (35%), private (47%), Tribal (8%), state (7%), BLM (3%)	Mt. Hood National Forest (54%)	Unita-Wasatch-Cache National Forest (66%)	Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest (34%), private (41%), BLM (21%), State (2%), Tribal (1%)

* Numbers reported here come from the U.S. Forest Service's Wildfire Crisis annual reports published in February 2024 and January 2025.

Our primary research questions were:

- 1 **What is the background of how individual WCS landscapes were designated?**
- 2 **How are WCS landscapes accelerating their work through partnerships, policies or authorities, and other innovative approaches?**
- 3 **What primary challenges are WCS landscapes facing, and how are they measuring success?**

This fact sheet presents our key findings aggregated across all the case studies and is organized by research question. We highlight specific cultural, economic, ecological, and policies in use where there are distinctions among case studies. We conclude with recommendations and reflections on the implications of these findings for future governance of national forestlands. We include illustrative quotes from interviewees. Where relevant, we also include progress and updates that occurred after our data collection. This research is part of a multi-year research project on Shared Stewardship funded by the USFS, conducted independently by us at Colorado State University, the University of Oregon, and the University of Georgia, and under approved human subjects research protocols. Our study design focused on how the WCS was leveraging Shared Stewardship agreements.

Collectively, findings from across these four landscapes offer valuable insights for planning and implementing effective landscape-level fuels reduction, building upon existing strategies and partnerships. Lessons learned across the case studies can help inform future efforts to better address the needs of communities, forests, and key partners involved in forest restoration and fuel reduction throughout the West. As the Forest Service increasingly relies on partners, this work is especially relevant for understanding the role of non-federal organizations in federal land management efforts.

Research Methods

These four geographies were selected after consideration of several criteria, including: Research relevancy and opportunity (e.g., history of Shared Stewardship, USFS regional diversity and opportunity for tribal engagement, recommendations from agency advisors), and pragmatism (e.g., willingness, interest, and availability of staff to participate, minimizing duplicative research on WCS landscapes).

For each case, we conducted 7-20 interviews, depending on availability, number of partners, and willingness to be interviewed. Interviewees included people who led on Shared Stewardship efforts, the WCS, or were knowledgeable about the WCS designation or implementation. Primarily, we spoke with individuals in the U.S. Forest Service, along with local, state, and other federal agencies (See Table 2).

Table 2. Interviewee Distribution by Organization (all case studies)*

ORGANIZATION	NUMBER OF INTERVIEWEES
U.S. Forest Service	17
Other Federal Agencies (e.g., U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Natural Resource Conservation Service)	3
State Agencies	15
Local City or County Government	5
Other participants: Local non-governmental organizations, forest products industry, Tribal representatives**	11
Total Interviews	51

* These numbers reflect the number of individual interviewees, not the number of interviews conducted.

** In most case studies, the USFS planned to coordinate with Tribes, but had yet to involve Tribal representatives at the time of our interviews.

Key Findings

1 What is the background of how individual WCS landscapes were designated?

All 21 WCS priority landscapes were designated at the federal level based on multiple selection criteria, including the presence of National Forest System lands, wildfire risk levels, proximity to communities, critical infrastructure, and public water sources. Mt. Hood, Wasatch, and the Sierra-Elko were designated as national priority landscapes in 2023, while the Enchanted Circle was designated in 2022. Primary values at risk were similar across all our case studies, including the vulnerability of the wildland urban interface, watershed degradation, endangered species, and recreation sites (e.g., ski areas).

Our interviewees reflected on additional reasons why their landscape was likely designated. Interviewees across case studies said their history of effective, long-standing partnerships and use of existing authorities for cross-boundary work positioned their landscape well for successful project planning and implementation. As one interviewee reflected, “The Mount Hood has a history of successfully engaging collaborative groups, identifying concerns, and trying to get some things done. But also, a lot of Mount Hood is in that drier ecosystem, and the risk and the hazards associated with the potential for wildfire are pretty high. Those could have been contributing factors for why Mount Hood was selected” (Local Government interviewee, Mt. Hood).

We heard across all cases that existing priority area maps and state-level identifying infrastructure likely aided their applications. For example, interviewees in most cases pointed out that their Shared Stewardship agreement’s priority area maps aligned with their WCS landscape footprint, as these identified the primary values at risk and locations where the planning and implementation work needed to be prioritized. In New Mexico, the State Forest Action Plan identified the area as a priority. The WCS offered an opportunity to fund work on high-priority landscapes that had not been addressed through other programs, such as the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program. Mt. Hood and Sierra-Elko interviewees noted they had strong forest-level leadership and that significant acres were “NEPA-ready,” meaning that acres were already cleared for treatment through a completed National Environmental Policy Act process, which interviewees said may have further prompted the selection of their landscape.

The application for priority landscapes and most of the early stage-setting organizational work was done primarily by the Forest Service. In some of our case studies, state agencies were involved; however, according to interviewees, in all places there was a lack of significant input from local partners at the time of our interviews. Though there were plans to involve partners, in some cases, we heard that the lack of transparency about roles and funding disbursement were problematic with some partners.



RED PINE LAKE / UINTA-WASATCH-CACHE NF / UTAH

2 How are WCS landscapes accelerating their work through partnerships, policies or authorities, and other innovative approaches?

During planning and implementation, interviewees described many different types of partnerships and collaborations involved in reducing wildfire risk, and their roles were typically established well in advance of the WCS designation.

Across all case studies, state agencies and other federal agencies were involved in various ways. For example, in the Sierra-Elko, the Nevada Division of Forestry holds a critical leadership role, setting the direction and priorities for the state's cross-boundary work; they also subcontract with local fire protection districts. Other key partners across all case studies include local actors like non-profit organizations, forest collaboratives, city and county governments, University extension programs, and private land-owners. In the Enchanted Circle, stewardship outside of national forest boundaries has been led by Taos and Colfax Counties for private and land grant lands in those counties and by Taos Pueblo and Picuris Pueblo for the Tribal lands inside the Enchanted Circle footprint.³

Interviewees spoke about various authorities (i.e., approaches authorized through policy) and agreements they were using to accelerate their work. All four case studies attributed their readiness and success to cross-boundary authorities they had in place before the WCS designation. All landscapes used existing work planned under Shared Stewardship, Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership, Good Neighbor Authority, and the Wyden Amendment, although the latter was not mentioned as being in use on the Sierra-Elko. The process of developing those authorities helped create landscape priorities and working relationships among agencies, as illustrated in the quotes below.

“To truly get an all-lands approach, you’ve got to have agreements or vehicles for moving funds and resources back and forth amongst agencies in place to be successful. Shared Stewardship is fundamental to the success of WCS.”

USFS interviewee, Sierra and Elko Fronts

In addition to these authorities, each landscape highlighted innovative state-specific approaches that have supported project success. For example:

- **In the Enchanted Circle landscape**, the Forest Mayordomo Program has allowed members of local communities (e.g., leñeros / wood-cutters) to harvest firewood in designated areas under prescriptions set by the Carson National Forest. Through this pilot effort, the USFS and partners laid out 300 national forest acres into one-acre blocks and successfully engaged the community in conducting this work.

- **In the Wasatch**, interviewees noted the essential role of the Utah Watershed Restoration Initiative (WRI) in implementing cross-boundary projects. This partnership initiative started in 2006. Through the partnership, state agencies and partners have developed a statewide database for developing and prioritizing projects. WRI also streamlines the administration of funding, wherein all the partners involved pool their money together and then put out a single, large contracting bid for projects that they mutually agree to fund.

- **Mt. Hood** interviewees noted the importance of how the forest was using categorical exclusions for accomplishing their work. They noted they were one of the first national forests using a categorical exclusion for a fuels break to help establish secure evacuation routes, while also providing an opportunity to underground power lines, which reduce fire risk.

In summary, our case studies have accomplished various goals to date with the support of long-standing partnerships, existing cross-boundary authorities, and innovative approaches (Table 3).

“In Utah, we say that ‘Shared Stewardship is a way of doing business’ ... [Since] decades before the Shared Stewardship Utah agreement was signed, we relied on our partners to do far more work than the Forest Service could do alone, both on Forest Service lands and off of federal lands. Without that strong partnership already in place, we wouldn’t be nearly as effective ... We’ve got professionals from Forestry, Fire, and State Lands, from BLM, from Park Service, all helping out with prescribed fire implementation. The capacity of doing work is enhanced by the fact that we’ve got a really strong Shared Stewardship tradition in Utah.” USFS interviewee, Wasatch

³ Land grants or mercedes are legacies of grants of land by Mexico and Spain to individuals and groups made prior to the Mexican-American War. Within the land grants, families traditionally held a mix of private land along with defined rights to common lands. Land grants are a political subdivision of the state of New Mexico and hold certain authorities such as planning, zoning, and common land management.

Table 3. Goals and Accomplishments Across Case Studies

CASE STUDY	ENCHANTED CIRCLE	MT. HOOD	WASATCH	SIERRA & ELKO
Goals for Acres Treated*	FY 2022 - 2024: 32,500 acres <i>Includes FY 2022, since NPL designation in 2022, rather than 2023 like the rest.</i>	FY 2023 - 2024: 12,400 acres	FY 2023: 14,200 acres <i>Did not specify their goal of acres treated for FY 2024.</i>	FY 2023 - 2024: 37,000 acres
Total Acres Treated on NFS Lands**	FY 2023: 5,188 FY 2024: 9,977 TOTAL: 15,165 acres	FY 2023: 15,907 FY 2024: 10,479 TOTAL: 26,386 acres	FY 2023: 15,866 FY 2024: 15,257 TOTAL: 31,123 acres	FY 2023: 25,085 FY 2024: 21,599 TOTAL: 46,684 acres

*Numbers reported here come from the U.S. Forest Service’s Wildfire Crisis Landscape Investment reports for April 2022 (i.e., initial designation of 10 national priority landscapes) and January 2023 (i.e., designation of 11 additional national priority landscapes).

** Numbers reported here come from the U.S. Forest Service’s Wildfire Crisis annual reports published in February 2024 and January 2025.

3 What primary challenges are WCS landscapes facing, and how are they measuring success?

Across landscapes, people said they faced capacity-related challenges for implementing treatments. Core challenges interviewees mentioned across all case studies included: staffing capacity within the USFS related to hiring, planning, and housing; contractor and mill capacity (e.g., not enough contractors, lack of fuel treatment equipment, local mills lacking workforce); and lack of capacity for administration of intergovernmental agreements, which, combined with the influx of WCS funding, created additional workload on partners and reduced their ability to coordinate. For example:

- **Several non-federal partners on the Sierra-Elko** expressed a need for streamlining the federal administrative processes to transfer funds to signatory entities.
- **On the Wasatch**, interviewees said the limited timber industry in Utah presents challenges for accessing feller-bunchers, other equipment, and contractors necessary to accomplish forest operations.
- **Mt. Hood** interviewees said there is a need to enhance fuel crew capacity, but it is difficult to administer projects and hire staff within short planning and funding timelines.

Interviewees also shared various challenges related to planning. All case studies mentioned that limited NEPA-ready shelf stock is a key barrier to implementation, though there were NEPA-ready acres on some forests. We heard that a lack of USFS

capacity to complete NEPA in the timeframe needed to align with the WCS investments hindered the ability of partner agencies to help implement projects. Other contextual factors also created unexpected conditions that affected planning. For instance, the Carson National Forest was affected by the Hermit’s Peak-Calf Canyon wildfire, the largest wildfire in New Mexico history, which burned within the boundary of the priority landscape, required revisiting plans, and led to a temporary nationwide shutdown of prescribed fire use on national forests. Interviewees said this affected their ability to implement projects and accomplish burn acres in their first year.

Interviewees consistently said that a primary challenge is that federal funding is inconsistent, pointing to the need for sustained, long-term investments, particularly for scaling up treatments and conducting maintenance.

“The whole Wildfire Crisis [Strategy] has always felt to basically everybody that’s not the Forest Service like a very big promise ... ‘wildfire crisis’ is what? Three years old now? That’s still very brief to expect three years of accelerated funding to result in this massive increase in pace and scale, because it’s not a linear thing. It’s an S-curve. I think we’re still at the flattened part, and I would hate to lose the support, financial as well as political, right before it turns into the steep part.” USFS interviewee, Enchanted Circle

This point is particularly salient as we are now in another executive branch transition that may build upon previous efforts. However, as policy direction changes, the agency may move away from WCS to other priorities.

Interviewees from most case studies were generally skeptical that the conventional performance metrics of acres treated and timber volume sold were appropriate for measuring the success of the project. For example, in the Enchanted Circle, because of contractor and mill capacity limitations, the demand for commercial timber was generally lower than in other landscapes, whereas demand for firewood was much higher. Interviewees described that felled trees would be hauled away as firewood throughout much of the landscape, and that tops and branches would still need to be pile-burned. As a result, there was a mismatch between how progress was being measured and between the anticipated scale of forest thinning and the capacity to burn piles. Short-term metrics, like acres treated, fail to reflect broader goals of longer-term resilience and risk reduction.

We heard several suggestions for other useful performance measures. Primarily, these landscapes were interested in tracking wildfire risk reduction and the quality of acres treated, ecosystem restoration, adaptation to climate change, and project success over the long term. Interviewees consistently expressed that it was important to strategize shared priorities among partners, and, as such, some places recommended tracking collaboratively designed metrics, including some that would track collaborative partnerships, their involvement, and their satisfaction. For example, we heard the University of Nevada, Reno Whittell Forest & Wildlife Area is looking to track the number of landowners interacting with the project.



CARSON NF / NEW MEXICO

PHOTO Preston Keres

Conclusion

Early implementation of the WCS relied on existing partnerships and agreements, building upon years, if not decades, of previous work. Shared Stewardship efforts and other long-term, place-based investments and planning efforts were helpful for aligning mitigation efforts across jurisdictions, building collective capacity and agreement, and supporting ecological and community resilience.

We also heard about a variety of factors that presented challenges for these landscapes. The Forest Service's growing reliance on partners has not been matched by sufficient coordination, staffing, or administrative capacity. Not enough planning had taken place in some locations to rapidly increase implementation. Mill and contractor capacity were problematic, as was workforce planning (i.e., quickly moving or hiring enough USFS staff to accelerate work in these locations). Unexpected events like wildfires and activity bans also presented the need to adjust plans.

These findings have implications for the future governance of national forestlands. While the WCS and 2025 Shared Stewardship initiatives represent federal commitments to cross-boundary wildfire mitigation, implementation remains constrained by many of the same structural and institutional barriers that have been persistent over decades.⁴ In addition, we found that not all landscapes had the staff or foreknowledge of incoming WCS funding to complete planning. Our research found field-level observations that highlight persistent challenges in performance metrics for wildfire risk reduction, staffing shortages, inconsistent funding, and inconsistent commitment to long-term prioritization, planning, and workforce planning to have the capacity for administration of cross-jurisdictional efforts. As efforts to revitalize Shared Stewardship have returned, recent experiences suggest reliance on non-USFS partners to implement fuel reduction can help increase the pace and scale of work, but alone it may be insufficient to address the key challenges to achieving landscape-scale outcomes.

More Information

Researchers at the Public Lands Policy Group at Colorado State University and the Ecosystem Workforce Program at the University of Oregon, and the University of Georgia have been jointly conducting a five-year study to understand perceptions of Shared Stewardship, the nature of its implementation, and how the Wildfire Crisis Strategy leverages it.

FIND REPORTS and other publications about this ongoing research at: <http://sites.warnercnr.colostate.edu/courtneyschultz/shared-stewardship/>

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:

Courtney Schultz (P.I.), Colorado State University, Courtney.Schultz@colostate.edu

Heidi Huber-Stearns (co-P.I.), University of Oregon, Hhuber@uoregon.edu

Jesse Abrams (co-P.I.), University of Georgia, Jesse.Abrams@uga.edu

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⁴ Schultz, C. A., Jedd, T., & Beam, R. D. (2012). The Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program: a history and overview of the first projects. *Journal of Forestry*, 110(7), 381-391.