



# Ecosystem Workforce Program

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## CROSS-TRAINED LOCAL CAPACITY FOR INTEGRATED WILDFIRE MANAGEMENT

HEIDI HUBER-STEARNES, AUTUMN ELLISON, AND CASSANDRA MOSELEY

**T**he National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy is a collaborative effort that seeks, in part, to improve multi-jurisdictional coordination of wildfire management and expand local preparedness and response capacity. Local workforces that are trained to prepare for and respond to wildfire risks in their communities could play vital roles bringing together planning, risk reduction, and fire response. However, unpredictable work, limited state and federal budgets, diverse landowner objectives, and complicated contracting practices can create challenges for sustaining place-based workforces. How have some organizations developed local, cross-trained workforces to address wildfire risks alongside intensifying wildfire management needs?

### Approach

We examined three cases where organizations have deliberately sought to integrate fires suppression and hazardous fuels reduction work. We interviewed nongovernmental organization and agency staff and participated in local workforce discussion panels.

### Results

***CUSP: Sustaining local capacity through agreements and diversification.*** The Coalition for the Upper South Platte (CUSP) in central Colorado focuses on watershed health. In 2003, they began a forestry program aimed at restoring and maintaining healthy forests. In response to declining volunteers at the local fire department, CUSP also developed an in-house suppression crew. The crew participates in wildland fire training and activities in the region, including initial and extended attack activities, through agreements with local fire districts. CUSP maintains other projects such as fire

and stream restoration, trail maintenance and design, tree planting and research and program development as a means to sustain their 23-person workforce year round, as the fuels and fire suppression work alone is not sufficient. The fuels program is challenged with keeping costs low for competitive grants and bids, as many landowners will not pay higher costs for fire prevention work even though is an important component of fire preparedness. Thus, the work keeps crewmembers employed, but barely covers costs. Recently, CUSP began deploying team members as “single resources,” or individual firefighters. This has provided a new stream of income; in some cases, revenue from these single resources allows CUSP to reinvest earnings into the fuels reduction program to make it more financially viable. Although CUSP’s fuels reduction and fire suppression crew serves a clear need in the region, they reassess their ability to continue the work often, as financial support has not always been sufficient to maintain the program.



UNIVERSITY OF OREGON



**FIRE ADAPTED  
COMMUNITIES**  
LEARNING NETWORK

**Forest Stewards Guild: Supporting crews as independent businesses.** From 2000-2004, the Forest Stewards Guild in New Mexico originally employed staff to conduct forest restoration work, but faced significant challenges in finding sufficient work to keep crewmembers employed year-round. As a result, the Guild changed strategies during 2005-2007 and encouraged their trained crewmembers to branch out into their own businesses. The Guild supports the new businesses by contracting with them. As independent businesses however, they are responsible for finding their own customers, which allows them to work for a multitude of entities instead of relying only on the Guild for work. The resulting businesses participate in both fuels reduction work and fire management, including prescribed fire and suppression. The Forest Stewards Guild remains involved in local preparedness and response, but in different capacities (e.g. obtaining permits, outreach and technical support, writing low-complexity burn plans). The increased number of contracting businesses has created a more dynamic local workforce for addressing wildfire, but the businesses still face challenges with unpredictable suppression needs and restoration work that can make income highly variable. The businesses have tried to address these challenges by diversifying their non-suppression work. However, in one case the business decided to focus entirely on hazardous fuel reduction and other forest projects because fire suppression was too unreliable.

**Santa Fe: Community engagement and strategic collaboration.** The City of Santa Fe's wildfire division undertakes wildfire action planning, wildfire awareness, and risk reduction work. Beginning in 2010 the division employed a seasonal handcrew (currently five permanent staff, 15 seasonal) for projects on private and public property, including prescribed burning. The crew bolsters local, state, and federal suppression capacity and in some cases, has even served as a training ground for people who eventually join the city's structural firefighting crew. The city uses state grant money and revenue generated from fire reimbursements to pay crewmembers. The approach depends heavily on fire

suppression funding influxes to supplement work, and the city must at times find creative ways to pay staff, such as by reducing full-time staff positions to part-time, by looking for grants, or by increasing other work such as home wildfire risk assessments and other opportunities in the non-fire season. The city emphasizes that getting staff on fires and training them appropriately are critical to developing more qualified local wildfire responses.

## Implications

Cross-trained local workforces can be an effective method for integrating across Cohesive Strategy goals. Although some communities have found ways to develop this capacity, they continue to face considerable challenges in maintaining capacity alongside unpredictable local suppression needs. Interviewees emphasized the desire for stable, fair-pay work for local individuals to build local fire response capacity. Ensuring organizations can integrate sufficient projects for their crews' skill sets (e.g. forestry, hazardous fuels removal, home assessments and education) is critical for ensuring reliable local capacity to prepare for, reduce the risk of, and effectively respond to wildfire.



## More information

For additional information about this research please see:

Project page:

<http://ewp.uoregon.edu/managingthemarket>

Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network:

<http://fireadaptednetwork.org/about/>

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