

Napa Fire Prevention and Policy
Workshop:
Outcomes and Proposals

May 30, 2018

Presented by:

University of California Cooperative Extension

Napa County Farm Bureau

USDA – Natural Resources Conservation Service

Workshop Overview

On May 30, 2018 a workshop was held in Napa, California to address the increasingly prevalent issue of wildland fires in the Napa Valley uplands. The devastating effects of the recent fires in October 2017 has created urgency to increase our understanding of vegetation dynamics, fuels management and policies that can help communities in their fire prevention efforts.

Workshop presenters covered topics on post-fire recovery and management of natural lands, fire behavior, vegetation management tools and options, financial incentives and grant programs for vegetation management, historic land-use patterns and changes, and current policies that affect fire prevention strategies. The content presented in the presentations was broad, tailored to local situations, and inspired constructive conversations on wildland fire issues.

The workshop concluded with a facilitated brainstorming session to solicit input and ideas on fire safe planning, strategizing, implementation and policy directions. Below is a summary of the brainstorming session outcomes and suggested directions for policy makers at the county and state levels to consider in helping communities create more fire-safe regions.

The input provided by workshop participants can be categorized into four themes: Goals, Strategies, Values and Actions.

Goals

The workshop participants clearly identified three goals meant to provide guidance to Napa County and its residents over the next ten to twenty years. The first goal encompasses the most frequently repeated comments during the session.

Goal 1. Expand information sharing, communications and education of the importance of wildland fire prevention, practices and community strategies. Several fire safe councils and a Fire Wise Foundation currently exist in Napa County, but resources are desperately needed to develop and implement plans, update websites and maps, share contact information and develop regional priorities and strategies. A need was expressed for fire safe councils to collectively work with Cal Fire to identify areas most at risk of wildfires and coordinate focused activities. Education activities (in communities and in schools), communications and general community awareness about wildfire issues were identified as areas in need of improvement.

Goal 2. Have communities, especially those in high-risk areas, fully engaged in wildfire prevention awareness, activities and information sharing. One primary function of a fire safe council is to inform and engage people on wildfire issues and prevention practices, but getting

people interested and engaged is challenging. Absentee landownership, which can be common in Napa County, exacerbates the difficulty in engaging people on wildfire issues. An opportunity exists for the County of Napa, cities, Cal Fire and fire safe councils to collectively explore incentives to encourage community participation and engagement in fire safe councils and develop effective communication networks that include social media tools.

Goal 3. Develop and implement strategic wildfire fuel reduction plans that reduce potential harm to life and property from wildfires and balance ecosystem and conservation priorities.

This is a multi-faceted goal that will require leadership at the County level. Fuel reduction plans should apply the most appropriate and feasible vegetation management practices, including prescribed burning, livestock grazing, mechanical methods, herbicides and other recommended practices.

Strategies

Strategy 1, Education and Information Sharing. Education and information sharing was an important identified strategy to increase awareness of wildfire issues, exchange ideas on practices and strategies, and strengthen community / neighborly connections. Workshop participants suggested that fire safe tours be organized for residents to visit properties and communities with implemented fire safe practices, much like a peer-to-peer exchange. Tours and other activities, such as information seminars, can be informational and build neighborhood and community networks around fire safe and other community issues. Workshop participants indicated a need for general educational seminars around historical ecology and the role of fire and natural processes in the Napa Valley ecosystem. Written material can be mailed to rural landowners (in moderate/severe wildfire zones) included in their property tax bills or similar mailers since absentee landowners are often the hardest to reach.

Strategy 2, Financial Assistance. A common suggestion was the need for more financial assistance to better enable fire safe councils and fuel reduction and fire prevention practices. Fire safe councils are able to solicit grant funds, but often lack time and expertise among its active members to write grant proposals and administer grant-funded projects. A suggestion was made to create a tax, such as a special district tax, to help fund fire safe councils. A dedicated source of “hard” funds can support a part-time or full-time fire safe council administrator to oversee projects and activities, solicit grant funds, and coordinate activities with Cal Fire, other fire safe councils and County programs.

Strategy 3, Firebudsman Position. Creating a new position within Napa County focused solely on wildland fire issues was an idea that received broad support among workshop participants. The purpose of this position, a Firebudsman, would be to work with fire safe councils, Cal Fire

and relevant County departments in developing fire safe strategies, writing grants, coordinating fire safe activities and projects and bringing expertise to the communities. The position would function as a liaison between the various agencies and groups within Napa County working on wildfire issues and fill a role that currently does not exist due to limited resources and already extended workloads. Some expectations from this position would include improved communication and coordination on fire safe activities, improved organization of fire safe councils, increased resources for fire activities, and reduced wildfire risk in Napa County.

Strategy 4, Property and Community Planning. Several suggestions were proposed to improve wildfire planning on individual properties and on a community level. These suggestions ranged from activities that provide property owners assistance to County-enforced regulation of fuels management.

Wildfire risk assessment and risk reduction were two suggestions proposed by workshop participants. A need was identified for Cal Fire to expand its current risk assessments, focused on structures, to include broader vegetation / fuel management assessments for property owners. The recent fires revealed the need for wildfire fuel management beyond the defensible space guidelines, especially in high-wind wildfire events that can carry embers hundreds of feet. Strategic vegetation management on a broader scale can slow wildfire intensity and speed, saving lives and improving firefighters' ability to combat a fire. Another suggestion was for relevant County departments to actively work with communities in developing long-term strategic fire safe plans that address wildfire prevention and disaster preparedness.

A creative idea was suggested for property owners to brand or promote their properties as "fire safe" or "fire ready" much like agricultural operations are branded for elements of sustainability. A branded program would require a certifying body with developed standards and practices for wildfire readiness, something that currently does not exist in Napa County. A branded program could raise awareness of the importance of wildfire preparedness and promote the implementation of fire prevention and preparedness practice.

County-enforced regulations and zoning around wildfire prevention and preparedness was suggested as a means of implementing broader community-level strategies. A "high-fire hazard" zoning designation would be used to trigger wildfire fuel management practices according to a developed plan. This suggestion was made in light of the difficulty encountered in some areas of the County in achieving active engagement and cooperation among residents on coordinated fire safe planning and implementation. While this idea addresses a real issue within the County, workshop participants expressed a preference for incentives over regulations for achieving fire safe goals.

Values

Workshop participants were asked to discuss and provide values they are trying to maintain or change, with respect to wildfire issues. The discussions on values revealed underlying principles that guide approaches to addressing wildfire issues.

An overarching theme of values was expressed around non-regulatory government assistance and incentives to organize and empower landowners and communities to implement fire safe practices. Many participants shared the view that fire safe councils provide real benefits to their communities, but need more support to achieve their goals in engaging more community members, developing broader strategic plans, and coordinating activities and plans with other agencies and groups.

A strong sense of community and shared responsibility in addressing fire safe issues was another explicitly expressed value. The idea that “We are in it together” made the point that communities can only be successful on fire safe issues if all community members assume their share of responsibility in making their properties safer for themselves, their neighbors and their community.

Considerable discussion proliferated around competing values that participants felt impede the implementation of fire safe practices. Other values, such as conservation, environmental protection, and air quality are important to society, but have perpetuated policies and land management decisions that prevent effective wildfire prevention practices and may exacerbate wildland fire severity. The policy most often cited as a hindrance to wildfire prevention is the strict air quality enforcement that severely limits prescribed burning for vegetation management and bans the burning of brush or pruning piles. Workshop participants felt that the risks to life, health, and property presented by uncontrolled wildfires are much greater to society than risks presented by prescribed burns that reduce wildfire incidences and severity. Included in this discussion was the issue of maintaining un-managed “wild” areas for conservation or environmental protection purposes and the increased wildfire risk these areas present to adjacent landowner and communities due to accumulated wildfire fuels. Rather than dismissing conservation and environmental protection values, there was a strong desire to find more balance or common ground between these and fire prevention values with an eye towards more strategic planning based on the degree of environmental value and the degree of wildfire risk.

Actions

The session concluded with a request for workshop participants to propose actions and policies that state and local policy makers can make to facilitate fire risk reduction practices. Since

many of the suggested policies and actions are addressed in preceding sections, a bulleted list of action items is used to limit redundancy.

- The Napa County Board of Supervisors should regularly re-visit fire safe issues to ensure goals and policies remain relevant and progress is realized.
- Road improvements are needed to improve vehicular movement during emergencies and to remove vegetation hazards along roadways. Better road signage is needed to inform residence of fire escape routes.
- Create a new County-funded, Firebudsman, position to serve as a liaison between agencies and groups addressing fire safe issues and to promote and support fire safe efforts.
- Create mechanisms to fund fire safe councils with reliable “hard” money to support administrative functions.
- Identify areas of high wildfire risk, using Cal Fire maps, and create mechanisms to ensure landowners are informed of the risk, just as landowners are informed of the right to farm ordinance. This may require the training of realtors so that wildfire risk information and resources are communicated to new landowners.
- Develop a fire safe program or certification that can be used to communicate fire prevention and preparedness of properties to insurance companies for lower rates.
- Develop regulations and incentives for the installation of raised water tanks, water storage, and other infrastructure that will improve wildfire protection in the event of a power outage.
- Create incentives (streamlined permitting, subsidies, etc.) for homeowners in high-risk areas to upgrade facilities with fire resistant materials and design.
- Develop a well-researched case or position that advances the needs for more aggressive vegetation management utilizing prescribed fire, livestock grazing and mechanical methods.
 - A recent report from the Little Hoover Commission titled “[Fire on the Mountain: Rethinking Forest Management in the Sierra Nevada](#)” will support this effort.
 - A National Academy of Sciences publication titled “[Long-term perspective on wildfires in the western USA](#)” will also support this effort
- Develop a strategic approach with State lawmakers and air quality regulators in finding more balance between the needs of fire safe communities and public health.
 - A 2017 [research article](#) provides evidence that wildfire emissions create a greater public health hazard compared to emissions from prescribed burning.
 - A 2018 [research article](#) describes the public health impact on adults from wildfire smoke exposure in 2015 in 8 California air basins.
- Lastly, the County can advance fire safe efforts by writing press releases of fire safe work and success stories happening in the communities