

People and Fire in Western Colorado: Methods of Engaging Stakeholders

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Abstract—In the context of the National Fire Plan, greater attention should be given to the engagement of communities in mitigating catastrophic wildfires. An overview is presented of a study in Western Colorado based on over 25 focus groups. This study seeks to discover improved ways to foster participation and ownership among local citizens and stakeholders in fire prevention and education efforts. The focus group process addressed local definitions of the “wildfire problem,” community values placed at risk by wildfire, conditions and resources that would facilitate greater community participation in dialogue and action, and recommended fire prevention messages and methods of communication and education.

Introduction

The conduct of social science research about fire behavior and management should be placed in the context of the growing involvement of communities in stewardship improvements on public lands, or what in many circles is being called community-based forestry. In so doing, the focus of community-oriented research shifts from viewing people as mere respondents to a set of study questions toward being participants in a potential or anticipated community engagement process. This reorientation seems especially relevant in the additional context of the National Fire Plan, because of its mandates for greater involvement by citizens in addressing common resource management concerns in the community-public land interface.

Let us consider community-stewardship, civic engagement, and the National Fire Plan as an integrating context for the research project known as “People and Fire in Western Colorado,” an inquiry that addresses how more meaningful community conversations might be pursued about catastrophic wildfire prevention and mitigation.

Community Stewardship and Civic Engagement

Attention to community stewardship is a growing phenomenon in natural resource planning and management. At the heart of this process is the basic principle that people, communities, and the surrounding landscapes need to be connected if they are to be mutually sustainable. (See Gray et al. 2001.) Whether the specific form of stewardship relies upon public participation, civic engagement, collaborative learning, community development, alternative conflict resolution, community action, or action research, the fundamental intent is to build new forms of problem-solving relationships whereby community

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members engage authentically with natural resources issues and goals. In other accounts, the theme of linking communities and public lands is paramount. (See the Four Corners Public Land Partnership program descriptions available at www.fourcornersforests.org, or Office of Community Services-Evaluation Reports at Fort Lewis College <http://ocs.fortlewis.edu>.)

Gary McVicker, a person well known in Colorado for his leadership in promoting community-based stewardship efforts, notes that traditional processes of land use planning place the lead planning organization in “the center of competing interests, ... but they have largely failed to win the support and, more importantly, ownership from these competing interests.” McVicker believes that much of public land use planning can be characterized as “more an investment in formal decision-making than in public consensus; demanding more and more information to satisfy public interests; hampered by administrative appeals; costly, and not tied to agency budget processes for implementation; and losing public interest and support” (McVicker, Unpublished paper.)

Margaret Shannon, a leading spokesperson for collaborative stewardship of public lands, in expressing her concerns about how public land interests become framed as private interests, says that “current political institutions which reward interest driven behavior...must be redesigned so as to require civic conversation when the public good is at stake” (Shannon 1992.)

As we empirically consider the range of public perspectives about fire behavior and management in local communities, should we not be thinking of developing a conversation among stakeholders, leading to community stewardship? Should our fire prevention education process not attune itself more clearly to community conversations, rather than stop at the content of the message? (See “A Civic Conversation about Public Lands: Developing Community Governance” by Sam Burns in Gray et al. 2001.)

The Community as the Context of the National Fire Plan

The central focus of the National Fire Plan, the “wildland-urban interface,” is by definition a community issue or concern. Whatever goals, plans, and actions are developed to reduce the risk of destructive fires at the border between public and private lands will require the support of many community groups, interests, or stakeholders. The hope that the National Fire Plan will change management emphasis from fire suppression to fire risk reduction underscores the need for greater participation and ownership on the part of communities.

Not only does this process need to involve communities in a collaborative planning process, it also needs to address long-term stewardship of larger scale ecosystems, and building economic capacity to reduce and utilize fuels removed from landscapes and watersheds adjacent to communities. (See case study on the Ponderosa Pine Forest Partnership, Richard and Burns 1999.)

Greg Aplet, a forest ecologist with the Wilderness Society, emphasizes the critical role of communities in the National Fire Plan when he notes that of the four primary actions needed, three of them are the responsibility of local communities. He notes:

“First, we must protect our communities...

Second, we need to determine where the places are where we can still allow fire to play its natural role...

Third, we must restore fire through prescribed burning in those forests whose structures will allow the safe reintroduction of fire...

Finally, on those parts of the landscape that will not burn safely, we must begin the process of mechanically treating fuels to create a structure that eventually will accept characteristic fire.”

Aplet concludes, “As I review these steps, it occurs to me that only one of them, the management of those places where we will allow fire to burn, is primarily a federal responsibility. The other three will require unprecedented cooperation of multiple stakeholders and levels of government to achieve” (Aplet 2001, p.5).

Since the introduction of the principles of “community based ecosystem management,” (see Gray et al. 2001), the stewardship capacity of local communities has been increasingly recognized. Furthermore, when placed in the context of the wildland-urban interface goals of the National Fire Plan, such principles become even more paramount, due to the heightened need for public-private cooperation and investment.

The National Fire Plan calls for increased action by communities in both planning and stewardship to reduce the risks of catastrophic wild fires. Citizens and leaders are being given increased opportunities to prioritize where risks exist, where fuel reduction efforts should occur, and the degree and scope of the fuel treatments. In Southwest Colorado, the five counties of Archuleta, Dolores, Montezuma, La Plata, and San Juan have developed, with support from the San Juan National Forest, county fire plans that identify high-risk or fire prone areas on private and public lands and propose a range of collaborative mitigation and prevention actions (available through the Office of Community Services, Fort Lewis College or see on line at Southwestcoloradofires.org). As the National Fire Plan is implemented, and as community interaction and partnerships evolve, there is increasing awareness that the values, attitudes, and knowledge held by community members about natural and prescribed fire are key components to successful mitigation of catastrophic wildfire. Why is this true?

The ways in which citizens and policy makers understand the role and significance of fire, and the condition of surrounding ecosystems, continuously affect the goals, strategies, and actions that they deem appropriate to reduce wildfire risk and to restore forested and rangelands to sustainable levels of health. If no collaboration is created in the wildland-urban boundary area, effective, public-private stewardship will be diluted, if not totally derailed.

Orientation of the Research Project

Previous community-oriented, social science research has tended to focus on public perceptions or acceptability of various fire management strategies. (See Cortner et al. 1981 and Machlis et al. 2002, which addresses previous research public perceptions and acceptability of fire.) Many studies have addressed perceptions of wildfire risks to communities, attitudes toward the role of fire in ecosystems, the degree to which managed fire will be deemed appropriate, and other topics. Since the National Fire Plan calls for resource managers to work cooperatively with communities and citizens to manage fire behavior and effects, it is imperative that multi-party resource stewardship efforts be undertaken. In cross boundary situations between private, local, and federal government entities, a lack of participation by one party will maintain existing hazardous fuels, which will negatively impact all adjacent properties

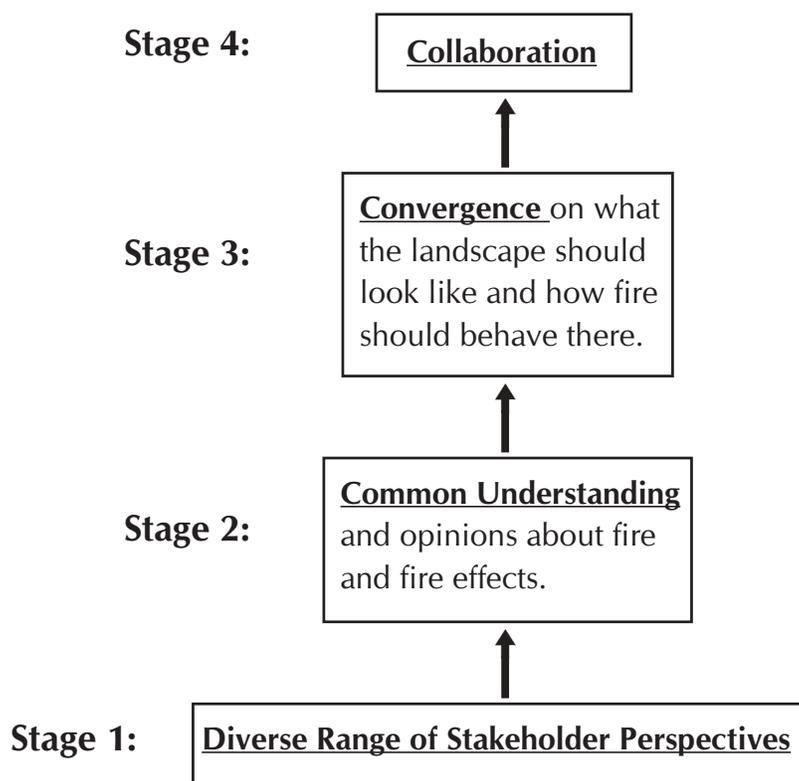
However, involving a variety of interests in collaboratively planning and implementing prescribed fire on public and private lands is an ambitious goal. To begin with, many of the parties do not share a meaningful common view of fire's role in the natural environment, its effects, or whether public investment in

fire mitigation should become a high priority. (The debate over the proper role of thinning and prescribed fire has continued well into 2002, after another major wildfire season; see Kenworthy 2002 and Robbins 2002 as recent examples of the level of disagreement about defining the “problem” or “issue,” or potential “solutions.”)

To reach the goal of communities and fire managers (professional and volunteer) working alongside each other, improving public safety, and making forest lands more healthy, much more needs to be understood about the values and understandings of fire held by the various interest groups. In February 2002, social scientists (see Appendix 1 at the end of this paper) met to discuss the methodology of the People and Fire in Western Colorado Research Project. It was proposed that a process of collaborative action and convergent understanding needs to be constructed from an array of beliefs and understandings held by diverse interests and groups. With a deeper knowledge of such attitudes, values, and perceptions, there might be a greater likelihood of multiple-party cooperation in addressing wildland-urban fire mitigation. (figure 1).

As indicated by this model, the orientation of the proposed research is to discover from communities how best to establish a relevant dialogue about fire mitigation and prevention; that is, how to better create the civic conversations needed to produce a multi-stakeholder community fire plan. Achieving this civic dialogue has obvious implications for the methods and content of fire prevention education.

Figure 1—Process for collaborative action and convergent understanding.



Objectives

The West Slope Community Fire Research Project has two specific steps or phases:

- To identify the relevant individuals and organizations that have interests in fire, natural and prescribed; have a stake in how fire occurs and is managed;

and could play an active role in community efforts to reduce risks of catastrophic wildfire.

- To gather and document the values, attitudes, and knowledge held by these interests and stakeholders through facilitated group discussions in a manner which takes into account the social, economic, and cultural diversity of Western Colorado.

These objectives will constitute the two phases of the overall research project. The stakeholders will first be identified, and then a series of discussion or focus groups will be held within several natural, social areas of each sub-region or study area (figure 2).

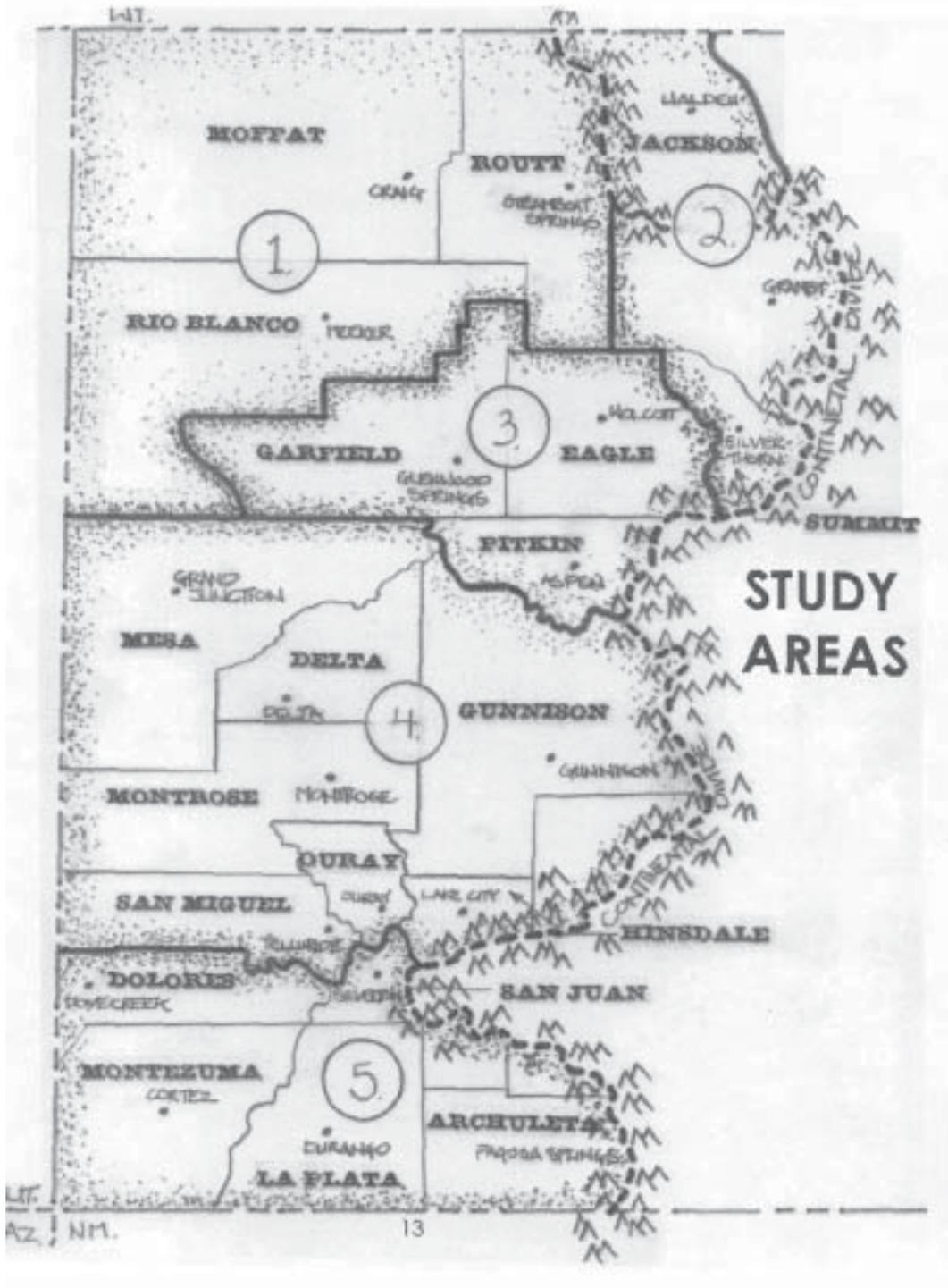


Figure 2—Study areas in Western Colorado.

Strategy

The study region for research on community and social understandings of fire is the Western Slope of Colorado, in essence that portion of the state lying west of the Continental Divide. This area consists of 21 counties, which will be divided into five sub-regions based on watersheds, economic patterns, and demographic and lifestyle characteristics. Throughout Western Colorado, the federal government, under the auspices of the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the National Park Service, manages most of the land base. The tribal lands of the Southern and Ute Mountain Ute Tribes also contribute to a low percentage of privately owned lands, which in some counties can be under 10 percent.

The Western Slope in general can be described as a region in transition from an economy based in agriculture and mining to one linked to tourism, retirement communities, and recreation. However, the pace of this transition is markedly different throughout the Western Slope, which further underscores the need to assess the values and understandings of community members about fire, fire risk, and management within distinct sub-regions.

In order to begin the process of gathering the knowledge and understandings that could become the basis of a convergence-collaborative process, approximately 25 focus groups will be conducted in the 21 counties in Western Colorado. The counties will be divided into five study areas as per the attached map. A single two-hour meeting will be held in selected communities within each natural topographic-social region.

Diverse stakeholders will be chosen from a variety of interest areas such as recreation, wildlife, real estate, and local government. However, and perhaps more importantly, stakeholders will be selected for a balanced knowledge of both community and fire issues. Stakeholders need not be formal community leaders or professional experts about fire, although there could be some of these persons represented. It is preferable that the various interest-oriented stakeholders include persons who know something about citizen concerns about surrounding forest lands, about beliefs regarding natural and prescribed fire management, and about what it would take to reach common understandings about wildfire mitigation planning and decision making.

While focus group members may have strong views of their own about reintroducing fire into surrounding ecosystems, or thinning the lands adjacent to a given community, they should also be open to listening to other viewpoints in a dynamic group discussion. Most strategically, they should be willing to assist in describing what others believe or think about fire and appropriate management solutions, in a manner that could be utilized to build convergence and collaboration around a community based fire management plan.

The sample for this research will not be chosen randomly and evenly throughout Western Colorado. Rather, the participants will represent the attitudes and values of the social and cultural places where they live and work, or what many analysts refer to as a “sense of place.” Places in Western Colorado vary dramatically as a result of recent economic and demographic changes. There are traditional ranching communities like the west end of San Miguel County, and second home enclaves like Aspen. Among these and many other communities, there are quite different relationships with the surrounding forestlands. (See Swanson 2001 and the socio-economic data profiles on communities in Southwest Colorado collected as a part of the San Juan National Forest Plan Revision, 1996-98.)

Focus Group Inquiry

Four areas of inquiry will be pursued with each focus group:

Framing the Issues

- From your perspective, what is the wildfire problem or issue?
- Do you see wildfire as a problem, or merely an issue?
- Do some people in the community not see wildfire as a problem?
- How do various groups in your community view the wildfire problem-issue?
- What terms do people use to frame or describe the wildfire problem-issue?
- To whom do people attribute responsibility for the wildfire problem-issue and/or possible measures to reduce risk or threats, as they see them?

Community Values

- What locally held values cause people to think that wildfire is a concern, in the sense that those values could be threatened or might be compromised by wildfire?
- Do certain groups hold these values in particular? For example from a governmental perspective, or any specific interest group positions?
- Do you have a sense of what the most important community values are related to wildfire and improving community safety?

Capacity for Community Dialogue

- What conditions would need to exist in your community, in order for you and others to develop a productive dialogue on fire issues and/or any actions to reduce community risks? Examples of “conditions” could be a level of trust among key parties, a sense that participation in the dialogue would result in productive outcomes, or having reasonable access to information and knowledge about fire risk and environmental conditions. (There could be many other types of conditions.)

Education

- What do members of your community need to know to begin to talk productively about the wildfire issues and potential measures to improve community safety?
- Where do people prefer to obtain information about community issues of this nature? (Radio, TV, newspaper, workshops, etc.)
- Are any particular means or methods of receiving information more acceptable to community members than others? (Brochures, videotapes, group presentations, field trips, etc.)
- Are you, or others you know, willing to be a part of a monitoring group that would visit sites where efforts are being made to reduce wildfire risks in your community as a part of a learning dialogue?

Engaging Stakeholders

In the conduct of community planning and decision-making processes, it is rather routine to ensure that stakeholder identification is representative with regard to a broad range of socio-economic and demographic characteristics. Typically, stakeholder selection would take into account employment, length of residence, political power, and age, among many other societal dimensions. While the importance of these factors is unquestioned in considering the democratization of resource stewardship, in the context of developing community based fire mitigation efforts, this research project will emphasize a

stronger sense of community capacity building, establishing civic dialogue, networking, relationship formation, and public conversation, and will therefore strongly influence the stakeholder engagement process.

In this light, the West Slope Fire Research Project has established a stakeholder identification and selection process based on the following conditions, assumptions, and attributes:

- A priority will be placed on stakeholder knowledge of local communities and their values.
- Similarly, stakeholders will be selected because they have a substantial degree of knowledge about fire and fire management, although they will not necessarily be “experts” in a professional or scientific sense.
- Engagement of stakeholders will occur on the basis of their active participation in envisioning and creating a civic conversation about fire impacts and mitigation measures.
- Stakeholders will be looked upon as representing communities of place, having social, experiential, and historical knowledge of a particular place, rather than as isolated, individual respondents who are merely sources of data or factual information.
- Utilizing local organizations, which facilitate the stakeholder nomination and selection process and serve as conveners of the focus groups, will increase the capacity of individual communities and regions to collaborate with fire management and education staff in the ongoing implementation of the National Fire Plan.
- Stakeholders will be given the option of serving as monitors in subsequent fire-risk reduction and education efforts, if such opportunities become available in their community study area.

Limitations and Challenges

Approaching the stakeholder identification and selection from a community action and development perspective, and seeking knowledge in an evolving local context, also present numerous challenges:

- Consideration has had to be given to coordinating with community fire planning that is in progress in many of the study areas. Some communities are just getting underway and others are nearly completed.
- In some cases, local fire management staff are reluctant to support a project, which they perceive as merely “research,” rather than one that actually gets work completed on the ground.
- Simply creating a network of stakeholders on a one-time discussion basis may create longer term public expectations about civic engagement that need to be recognized and appropriately addressed through opportunities to participate in fire management planning.
- Creating a stakeholder group of diverse interests in a region also raises other issues, such as identifying communication barriers among various private, state, and federal jurisdictions, which affect the research outcomes in both short and long term ways.
- Communities may experience large catastrophic wildfires, accentuating in the minds of many the urgency for community action and work with fire managers.
- In essence, when working within an action-oriented stakeholder-based research process, the research step often blurs into “action thinking,” to the

extent that in many communities there could be heightened interest in immediate or timely feedback of the project findings.

Summary Perspectives

Over the past 20 or so years, numerous studies have been undertaken with regard to social and communal values concerning fire risk, fire behavior and consequences, and fire management activities. Beginning in December of 2001, these studies were reviewed in order to discover previously asked questions and research findings. This review of previous social science research was compared and contrasted with several contemporary community fire planning efforts to prepare research agendas on the social aspects of fire, as well as recent conference proceedings. These findings were utilized as the basis for determining the focus of this research by the social science advisory team.

Within Western Colorado, five sub-regional study areas were chosen based on an analysis of river basins, social and economic characteristics, and other aspects of social and cultural geography and senses of place. These areas include Southwest Colorado south of the San Juan Mountains; the Uncompahgre and Gunnison Valleys from Ouray north to Grand Junction and running west to the Utah border; the high mountain areas between Glenwood Springs, Aspen, and Eagle along the I-70 corridor; and the northwest quadrant from Rio Blanco County east to the Routt County (figure 2). Within each of these five sub-regions, from three to five communities were chosen to conduct the facilitated group discussions.

Stakeholders were identified utilizing a wide range of networks within each sub-region. These include specific land and resource user groups, local government officials and staff, emergency management personnel, healthy community organizations, civic and non-profit groups, and wildlife and other conservation associations, among others. Stakeholder identification is being completed with an eye towards grounding the research process within local groups and networks, in anticipation that they can continue to participate in follow-up education, fire demonstration, and monitoring activities.

In February 2002, a meeting of social scientists was held in Fort Collins, Colorado, for the purpose of designing a protocol for the focus groups. This advisory team assisted in identifying research topics, key questions, and a scope of inquiry, which will be practical and advantageous to pursue in the group discussions. The discussion protocol served as a guide for the facilitators who conducted the focus groups, while allowing for local adaptability to fit special social and historical conditions.

Summaries of each group discussion were prepared. These were then collated into five study area reports, and finally into a Western Slope (the geographic area of Colorado west of the Continental Divide) set of findings and outcomes. The summaries will be made available to the local and constituent organizations, state and federal natural resource management staff, and fire education specialists for use in ongoing efforts to reduce catastrophic fire risk and implement local mitigation and stewardship practices.

The obvious question we have is whether engaging stakeholders for the purpose of developing community conversations and action about fire management will produce a different type and quality of local knowledge from standard survey research. Will this community-oriented stakeholder identification approach contribute to increased civic engagement and stewardship in the context of the National Fire Plan? Will this process of selecting persons

with community knowledge and fire awareness have any implications for how to reach the less attentive and informed public?

We believe that the relevance of this research approach is the potential of creating a model for enhancing community capacity to engage in collaborative, fire mitigation planning in the wildland-urban interface.

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Appendix 1

Timeframes

The research project was initiated through an assistance agreement between the Office of Community Services at Fort Lewis College and the Colorado Office of the Bureau of Land Management in September of 2001. The following time frames serve as the general implementation schedule for the project:

- October 2001-March 2002 / Research Design, Resource Identification and Contracting: During this period, previous research was reviewed, key resource persons in Western Colorado were contacted, a science advisory committee met and made recommendations on research questions, and research contractors were selected.
- March 2001-April 2002 / Stakeholder Documentation: The stakeholder identification phase will be completed, utilizing five sub-regions to focus the inquiry.
- May 2002-November 2002 / Discussion Group Analysis: Within each sub-region, a series of facilitated group discussions will be held to describe and document the values and perspectives of the various interests of individuals and groups about fire.
- September 2002-February 2003 / Analysis and Reporting.

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