The Collaborative Process

Collaboration is a powerful tool for improving both the management of wildland fire and the overall health of forests and other elements of fire-dependent ecosystems. But collaboration is not a one-time effort. It is an ongoing process that is most effective when maintained throughout program and project planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

How can you expect the collaborative process to unfold? The following seven stages are typical of most collaborations.

Identify the Issue and Context

Successful collaborations begin with issues that the community considers to be urgent but for which there is no clear consensus. Issue identification can be a delicate matter: residents need to become aware of the danger of wildland fire but often do not respond well to scare tactics. Meanwhile, local governments want to attract development and shy away from too many planning regulations. Remember, too, that who defines the issues may be as important as what issues emerge. So involving a broad range of interests and experience at this stage is critical.

It is important to assess whether the situation is even favorable for collaboration. Is there a history of conflict between different interests in the community over land management issues? If so, an experienced third-party, neutral facilitator can help. Are there adequate resources? Is there enough time? Are there political and legal restrictions that could impinge on the collaborative process? Limitations in these areas can make collaboration difficult but not impossible.

Gather Players

Initiating dialogue about wildfire and fuels management is typically the job of land management agencies. However, they are not always effective at assembling a sufficiently large, representative, and active group of community stakeholders. It might help to bring in a local convener, someone widely perceived as fair and respected.

Core participants are often land management agencies that are already cooperating and seeking similar solutions. Committed citizens, community leaders, public officials, and nonprofit and community organizations should be included as active partners in the group. At this stage it is essential to clearly define everyone’s roles, responsibilities, and expectations.

Establish Goals

Goals are created by discovering and building on shared values, perceptions, or experiences. A written mission or vision statement will underscore a common purpose. It can help focus participants, especially when the group is in conflict or considering strategic efforts, and it can reunite the group when motivation and cohesion wane.
Implement

It is not difficult to agree on the need to reduce wildland fire risk, but it is more challenging to agree on implementation—how and where to reduce fuels. Conflicts may emerge. But a focus on project outcomes can help mitigate personalities or constituencies that are at odds.

Recordkeeping and other mechanisms for ensuring accountability are important for keeping players and the broader public informed of accomplishments, and to facilitate monitoring and evaluation.

Monitor and Evaluate

Monitoring and evaluation can help determine the effectiveness of both the collaborative process and the project. Monitoring is often most difficult to accomplish, because groups may not recognize early enough the importance of gathering baseline data or identifying measurable objectives. But it is important for building accountability—a key issue since managing wildfire and fuels has become so politically charged.

The stages of collaboration seldom occur in linear fashion. Consider monitoring, for example, which must begin early in a collaborative project, and information sharing, which should take place throughout.

Source


Social Science Team Fact Sheets

Look for fact sheet topics from the Social Science Team including information on developing personal responsibility for fuels reduction, communicating fire hazard, topics for community fire plans, guidelines for community education, collaboration, and the “golden rule” for communicating fire hazard to people.

Fuels Planning: Synthesis and Integration

This fact sheet is one in a series being produced as part of a larger project supported by the USDA Forest Service to synthesize new knowledge and information relevant to fire and fuels management. Fact sheets address topics related to stand structure, environmental impacts, economics, and human responses to these factors. Information in the fact sheets is targeted for the dry forests of the Inland West, but is often applicable across broad regions of the country. For more information, please visit our Web site at: www.fs.fed.us/fire/tech_transfer/synthesis/synthesis_index