Co-Managing Wildfire Suppression in Southwestern Utah
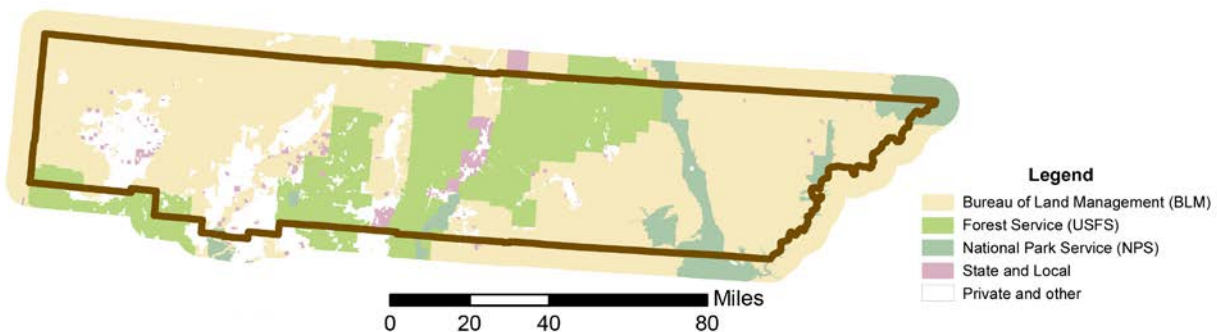
CO-MANAGING WILDFIRE RISK FACT SHEET SERIES | Project Fact Sheet No. 3   WINTER 2020

n a given area, there are commonly multiple agencies that manage wildfire suppression on different jurisdictions. These agencies can face divergent or even competing missions and mandates, yet must also address the cross-boundary nature of managing wildfire risk. Therefore, how can they more effectively co-manage fire suppression? Co-management in this context refers to communication, coordination, and collaboration between entities for meaningful collective action that shares the resources, costs, and burdens of managing fire risk. We examine factors that facilitated and limited co-management in a case study in southwestern Utah.

Legend
- Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
- Forest Service (USFS)
- National Park Service (NPS)
- State and Local
- Private and other

MAP *Mike Caggiano, Colorado Forest Restoration Institute*

About This Case Study

We conducted this case study in Iron and Garfield Counties in southwestern Utah.

These rural counties cover approximately 8,500 square miles with vegetation types that include sagebrush, pinyon juniper, ponderosa, and higher elevation aspen and mixed conifer species. The majority of land in the area is federally-owned (Figure 1). Land and fire management agencies in the region include the US Forest Service (USFS), Bureau of Land Management (BLM), National Park Service (NPS), Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS); Utah State Division of Forestry, Fire, and State Lands (DFFSL); municipal and county governments; and local fire departments.

Facilitating Factors

1 **The presence of interagency infrastructure:** Iron and Garfield Counties are within the area of the Color Country Interagency Fire Center, which provides a formal structure for five federal agencies (BIA, BLM, NPS, USFS, and USFWS) and one state agency (DFFSL) to cooperate on suppression. This includes agreements that allow the sharing of equipment and personnel across boundaries as needed, regardless of fire origin.

2 **Strong fire operations relationships:** Fire operations leadership (fire management officers or FMOs) from each agency in the area meet monthly throughout the year. With this regular contact, they have been able to foster close relationships and dialogue for proactively addressing challenges. These FMOs have remained fairly consistently in their positions with limited turnover, which has also aided the durability of these relationships.

3 **Personnel with diverse agency experience:** Some fire personnel in this area have prior experience working for other agencies. This has provided them with more diverse perspectives about others' missions, mandates, and cultures; and a greater understanding of how to cooperate effectively with those agencies.

4 **Pre-season planning and communications:** Work that occurs before the fire season helps lay the groundwork for stronger cooperation during it. For example, fire management agency personnel hold meetings with entities like county commissioners and local fire departments. At these meetings, maps showing values at risk and priorities for different suppression strategies are used to guide the conversation. Throughout the year, other meetings (e.g., the Color Country Fuels Committee, local Utah Catastrophic Wildfire Reduction Strategy Committee, and Utah Watershed Restoration Initiative meetings) help prioritize fuels reduction and mitigation activities in focal areas and further emphasize shared values at risk.

PHOTO *Emily Jane Davis*

Limiting Factors

1 **Personnel turnover:** Although there has been significant consistency among FMO personnel, there has been more turnover among other types such as district rangers and natural resource staff. These staff, who serve as agency administrators and in other positions on incidents, have not been able to rely on the same relationships and social processes as the fire operations group.

2 **Differences in suppression mandates:** Each fire management agency in the area has different mandates. For example, DFFSL protects private lands through full suppression, while NPS and other agencies may manage fires on federal lands for multiple objectives. These differences are understood and respected within the interagency context, but may inhibit the management of cross-boundary fires for uniform objectives.

3 **Limits to sharing risk:** Although fire management agencies cooperate within the interagency context in southwestern Utah, there are also inherent limits to sharing risk. These limits stem from established legal and statutory rules that retain responsibility with the decision maker on an incident, and with the agency with protection authority for the lands on which a fire originated. Sharing incident costs across agencies can pose challenges as well, depending on the affected jurisdictions and management objectives.

Lessons Learned

Southwestern Utah's fire suppression partnerships appear to benefit from the presence of an interagency fire center, a culture with relatively low personnel turnover, and strong interpersonal relationships among the fire operations group. These conditions may not exist in all other places, but a culture that encourages co-management of suppression may still be supported anywhere with deliberate efforts to ensure regular dialogue. This may include institutionalizing pre-season discussions of values at risk, standard processes for communication among agencies and with the public, and regular meetings among fire operations personnel. The keeping and sharing of detailed notes, maps, memos, and other "artifacts" of these processes may help foster some institutional memory even in the face of turnover.