

Burning Without Borders: Cooperatively Managing Wildfire Risk in Northern Colorado

PHOTO Tony Cheng

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Because wildfires don't stop at ownership boundaries, managers from governmental and nongovernmental organizations in Northern Colorado are taking steps to pro-actively "co-manage" wildfire risk through the Northern Colorado Fireshed Collaborative (NCFC).

For this research project, co-management refers to the collective actions taken by organizations to share the resources, costs, and burdens associated with managing fire risk across a large landscape.

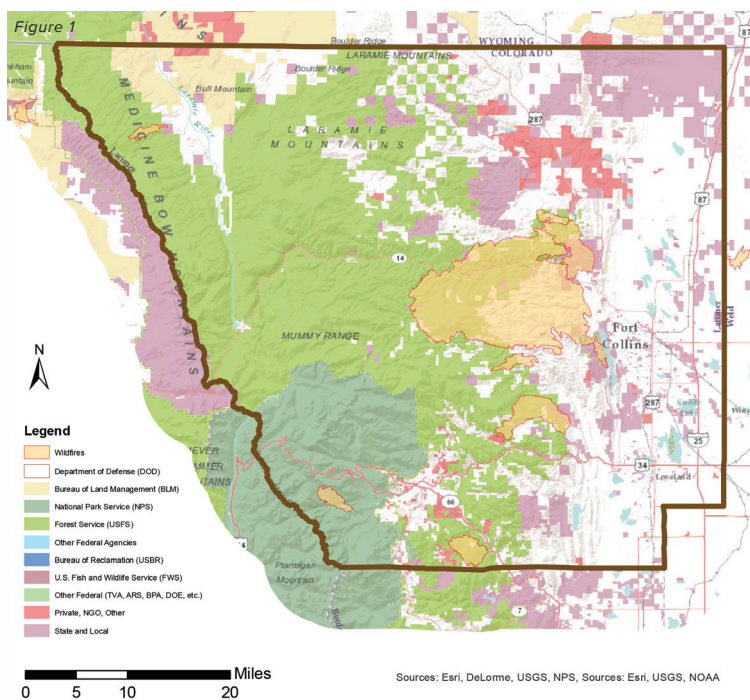
We examine factors that facilitated and limited wildfire risk co-management in a case study of the NCFC.

About This Case Study

The NCFC is comprised of ten organizations spanning federal, state, local, and private forest land and fire management, conservation, research, and community-based watershed organizations that came together in 2017 to proactively address wildfire risk through strategic and coordinated cross-boundary forest and fire management in Larimer County in northern Colorado (Figure 1).

Of the county's nearly 1.7 million acres, 39 percent is managed by the US Forest Service as the Arapaho-Roosevelt National Forest, 37 percent is under private land ownership, eight percent is managed by the National Park Service as Rocky Mountain National Park, and the remainder are smaller parcels of federal, state, and local governmental and non-governmental jurisdictions (e.g., Bureau of Land Management, Colorado State Land Board, Colorado State Wildlife Areas, Larimer County, municipal cities, private non-profit camps or ranches) intermixed with the national forest and private lands in a checkerboard arrangement.

While managers have been carrying out mechanical vegetation removal and prescribed burns to reduce wildfire risk since the early 2000s on their respective jurisdictions, the size and severity of recent wildfires like the 2012 High Park Fire have prompted a shared realization that the scale and



intensity of these individual, independent actions are insufficient to match the scale and intensity of future wildfires. In particular, there is a need to increase the scale of prescribed burning and increase the options for managing wildfires beyond solely full suppression across this checkerboard of land ownerships and jurisdictions. Addressing this need has required new forms of organizing, communicating, planning, and working together on the ground.

Facilitating Factors

Since its inception in 2017, the NCFC has been developing and adaptively adjusting a set of features to facilitate the ability of participants to transcend their own organizational and jurisdictional boundaries to work collaboratively. We denote these “boundary-spanning” features using the acronym SCOPA. **SCOPA features include:**

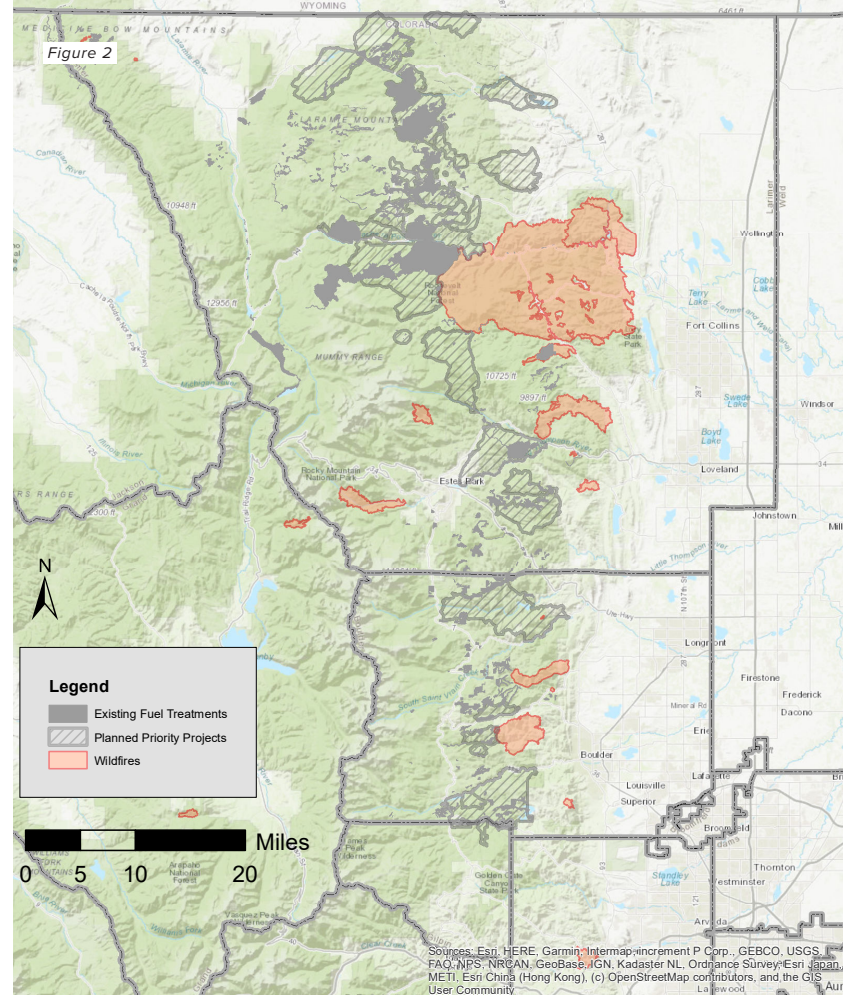
S Settings: The NCFC is both a physical and organizational setting that unites different organizations under a common mission. The physical setting of northern Colorado’s Front Range has experienced several large, severe wildfires, including the 87,000-acre High Park Fire in 2012 that resulted in one fatality and 259 structures lost. The organizational setting of the NCFC is a network of individuals and organizations that interact, communicate, and coordinate regarding projects, resources, and future opportunities. This network is dynamic as strategic planning, communications, and project implementation engages more entities interested in and affected by wildfire risk management.

C Concepts: The NCFC has been organizing its communications and activities around commonly-understood concepts, such as “strategic priorities”, “preventative mitigation”, and “shared risk, shared responsibility”. In turn, these concepts contribute to participants’ common sense of purpose and group identity.

O Objects: NCFC participants have collectively developed several products that serve as touchstones for their collective activities. Most critical is a regularly updated map of past, current, and planned mechanical thinning and prescribed fire projects carried out by each organization across ownership jurisdictions (*Figure 2*). A benefit of a common map is that prospective funders are able to see where, how, and why their investments will be leveraged to create a larger impact. A common map is also a powerful way for NCFC partners to communicate to their respective local community constituents and stakeholders about how activities are coordinated in a strategic way.

P People: The NCFC has been collectively led by a diversity of individuals across government, nongovernment, and research organizations with authority to commit their respective organizational resources towards achieving the NCFC’s goals. These individuals are also well-positioned to communicate with leaders and influencers in other organizations to build support, procure resources, and foster political legitimacy.

A Actions: NCFC participants carry out three sets of actions: **1)** science-informed, spatially-explicit fire risk assessment and response planning across jurisdictions; **2)** community outreach, education, and communications; and **3)** operational implementation of mechanical tree and brush removal and prescribed burning in priority areas. Cutting across each activity are monitoring, evaluation, and adaptive management processes.



Lessons Learned

The NCFC has benefited from:

- Collective recognition among NCFC partners that managing wildfire risk is a shared responsibility requiring shared risks, investments, and accountability.
- Access to scientific expertise on wildfire risk analysis, collaborative planning, and effects monitoring.
- General social acceptance of active management to address risk, due to the recent history of wildfires in the area.
- Committed leadership of these organizations to dedicate resources to the NCFC.

And has been challenged by:

- Meeting fatigue.
- Reliance on a few key individuals to maintain progress, as co-management processes and practices are not yet sufficiently institutionalized into everyday routines.
- Limited operational fire management capacity to expand the scope and scale of prescribed fire and safely co-manage wildfire.
- Gravitational pull of home organizations’ missions, priorities, performance targets, and incentives, which can limit consistent participation.
- Competition among NCFC participants for limited funding opportunities.

Information in this fact sheet is derived from interviews, document analysis, and member checking conducted through an applied research project: *Co-Managing Risk or ‘Parallel Play’? Examining Connectivity Across Wildfire Risk Mitigation and Fire Response in the Intermountain West*.

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