

Oregon Fire Resilience Network Kicked Off in March

By BEF Staff

The Oregon Fire Resilience Network (OR FRN) kicked off in March with an all-day workshop and participation from a diverse group of wildfire practitioners, planners and agency representatives. OR FRN supports knowledge sharing and connections for action focused community-based capacity to accelerate fire resilience and recovery in Oregon. The workshop consisted of a series of talks on a variety of wildfire and cultural fire topics, mixed in with lively group breakout sessions that allowed participants to introduce each other to their wildfire work, the barriers they face, and potential opportunities to catapult their work forward. The workshop culminated in a full group discussion on strategies

to harness the energy of the day and continue the collaborative momentum in future exchanges. The convening was the result of several months of planning by BEF staff and a temporary advisory team of wildfire partners. The willingness of the workshop participants to explore the realm of possible solutions to a range of complex wildfire related problems, no matter how farfetched, and to hold open and respectful discussions amongst groups that may not normally work in collaboration left me feeling hopeful and energized that together we can make significant strides in restoring healthy relationships with wildfire that are better adapted to the current and future wildfire landscape in Oregon.

Fire, whether started intentionally, accidentally, or naturally, or whether it is suppressed unnaturally, shapes Oregon's landscapes. Before naturally occurring wildfire and Native American use of fire were suppressed, people used fire in sophisticated ways for socio-ecological resilience.

Areas like the Willamette Basin that have not experienced widespread fire during the last 100 years of suppression-dominant wildfire management are facing increasing risk from wildfires due to climate change and forest conditions. These impacts include air quality impairment from local and regional fires, decreased resource availability during



Photo Credit: Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde

wildfires, and other multiple community stressors. A contemporary example of this was the multiple wildfires impacting Oregon and surrounding states during the Labor Day Fires of 2020.

Communities in wildfire-prone areas face a constant need to pivot through the before, during, and after continuum of preparation, response, and recovery. No single agency or organization can sustain coordination and financial capacity around this cycle season after season. Federal and state agencies work with strong intentions to develop programs and funding to support better fire outcomes, but do so within established systems that may leave community needs unmet. Communities often struggle to keep up with programmatic changes, and have to re-learn which program is right for them after every institutional or situational change. Fire adaptation networks can accelerate connections between community needs and agency intentions. Rather than independent and separated disaster response actions or existing programming such as Firewise USA, which is limited in its focus, a networked approach can generate connections among practitioners that lead to a more holistic approach to addressing complex wildfire problems. These connections have the potential to accelerate local development and use of practices that will increase overall resilience and address where communities and the landscapes they live in exist on the fire and capacity continuum.

The National Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network and the Washington Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network serve as excellent examples of networks that accelerate progress on landscape and community resilience by connecting key partners, generating much needed resources and tools and creating programming that cultivates the conditions for collaboration. These networks bring people from communities, governments, and organizations together to identify wildfire needs and build capacity to take actions.

The Oregon Fire Resilience Network, or OR FRN, was initiated through federal funding supported by the USDA Forest Service and Sustainable Northwest and by staff at Bonneville Environmental Foundation. It is being shaped by a

temporary advisory team of wildfire planners, practitioners and agency representatives and most importantly by OR FRN members themselves. The network serves as a space for members to connect each other with information, lessons learned, and align resources with emerging opportunities to support each other and work together. In-person convenings, online webinars and discussion panels, and online workspaces are platforms for connecting. OR FRN recognizes that everyone has a role to play, but no one should or can play every role. The network is creating space for strategic coordination to help members focus limited capacity more efficiently and effectively. Connected, network members have the opportunity to identify coordinated actions.

Several themes and creative ideas emerged out of the March workshop that will guide future OR FRN learning exchanges, convenings and general programming. Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPP) surfaced as a hot topic during group discussions. CWPPs are collaborative stakeholder driven plans that can coordinate actions on community fire resilience and recovery and unlock funding to do so. CWPPs do not exist for all communities in Oregon and many are severely outdated. Many discussions revolved around existing barriers to expanding cultural burning and how to overcome them. Indigenous stewardship and cultural burning will be the central topic for a fall network exchange (details to come!). Finally, there was general recognition and appreciation from the group that workshop participants made up a highly diverse group of wildfire specialists which do not typically interact, however, it was also emphasized that greater representation from black, indigenous, people of color and vulnerable communities is needed in OR FRN and essential for creating just and equitable fire adapted communities.

BEF staff are working with the technical advisory team to process all the feedback from the workshop and will present those results at the next OR FRN learning exchange. At this exchange, participants will develop a twelve-month work plan to guide programming for OR FRN over the next year.

Working under the guidance that we can go further together, OR FRN members will work to support each other, learn from each other, and re-learn to live with fire together. Fire does not stay within jurisdictional boundaries, so collaboration is key to efficiently leverage resources and move work forward in a way that makes sense for our landscapes and communities.

If you are a wildfire practitioner in Oregon and are interested in being an active member in OR FRN or learning more about the network, please contact jpzagarola@b-e-f.org



At the 2020 Echo Mountain burn scar (Oregon) in January 2021. Photo taken by Natalie Collar.