

Engage Whole Communities Equitably Through Public Participation



Whole (or equitable) community engagement recognizes and leverages the diversity of stakeholders in the public planning and implementation of the Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) process. This best practice underscores an understanding that the impacts of wildfire are felt throughout all communities, but especially within disadvantaged sectors. Accordingly, the CWPP process should seek to include all stakeholders from the inception, not only as informants but as empowered participants. Engaging the whole community ensures all voices are represented within the planning process, leading to more robust CWPPs and deeper community engagement. Stronger community engagement may, in turn, drive more effective action through improved strategy and ongoing public participation and support through all phases of the CWPP process.

Key Strategies for Engaging Whole Communities

Strategies for engaging whole communities with an eye toward equitable processes that gather rich perspectives and catalyze inclusive action include:

- **Build a robust and representative outreach team.** Recruit diverse partners and community-based organizations to help identify the full range of community voices and needs that should be represented in the CWPP process. Seek out organizations with experience in your project areas and court their engaged participation throughout the process. For example, Homeowners Association (HOA) representatives, tribal leaders, local conservation and land-based trade groups (e.g., ranchers, loggers), and relevant agency connections can help develop a holistic picture of the community's needs and build a comprehensive communication and outreach strategy.



- **Use diverse and trusted communication channels.** Work with your partners to identify how community members get their information. For example, where do people gather? What organizations or connection points do they trust, use, and lead? Once communication channels are identified, use them to proactively communicate CWPP activities with the community to build transparency and trust, encourage participation, and manage expectations.
- **Message the value of participating in the CWPP process.** Create messages that have a clear, relatable message about the value of engagement, and connect them to things your community cares about. For example, some people might find it beneficial to participate to increase their access to wildfire information, networking, or inclusion in decision-making. Strive to understand what matters most to community members by using tools, such as outreach surveys and listening activities, that encourage people to share their values, and then include this feedback throughout CWPP communications.
- **Expand engagement opportunities through different formats.** Acknowledge inequities and make participation in the process transparent and accessible for all community members. Consider and attend to different levels of comfort with technology and online platforms, English proficiency, technical language and formats, transportation access, and physical and mental disability. Do this by providing user-friendly formats for engagement or comments, online connection hubs, story maps, and language- and accessibility-sensitive formatting.
- **Communicate how community input is used and how it impacts the final plan.** As community members provide input, maintain and build upon their trust by demonstrating the impact of their participation. People will be more likely to believe and contribute to the process when they feel they are heard. Frequently communicate how feedback is being incorporated through the same diverse channels that are used for outreach.
- **Use the engagement process to strengthen community connections, build capacity, and make shared assets more accessible.** The old truism holds: the process is the product. Aim to develop an inclusive coalition of people from the community with enduring relationships that will carry the CWPP process forward for the long-term. Treat each engagement opportunity within your working group and in community outreach as a chance to build these relationships and invest in capacity building.
- **Continue whole community engagement throughout the entire CWPP process.** An accessible means for ongoing engagement with plans and their execution is crucial for continuing to include the public in the work of CWPPs. CWPP development is just one inflection point along the broader continuum of fire adaptation engagement, and it is often an entry point for folks who are new to the conversation. Continue including the whole community throughout CWPP implementation, evaluation, and future updates to ensure the process remains comprehensive, inclusive, and effective.



Organizing Community Member Engagement

The opportunity to engage and organize community members appropriately, based on their strengths and perspectives, is important. The following table describes four broad categories of community members and how they might be organized for engagement in the CWPP process. Each community has specific circumstances, and some stakeholders may fall into more than one category, but this chart will help communicate roles and guidance. For example, it would be inappropriate for hazard mapping and other data/scientific-based processes of the CWPP to be driven by public opinion or political agendas; however, it is important that the process and outcomes of these undertakings are well communicated and understood by public members and elected officials. Therefore, it might be appropriate for community members with these specific technical skills and knowledge to participate as technical experts, while others would be better suited to participate as interested parties or members of the public.

| Group | Who | Role | Participation |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| CWPP Working Group | Typically consisting of 3-5 people with expertise in fire and local planning / development, land management / natural resource management. | Leads the overall CWPP effort including project management decisions; manages and coordinates consultants (if applicable), meets with stakeholders. | Attends all working group meetings, attends stakeholder presentations, and public workshops or forums; communicates with consultants (if applicable); engages directly in plan reviews, input, data sharing, and other aspects of plan development and implementation. Refer to the CWPP Guide for more information on CWPP Working Groups. |
| Local Experts | Agencies, organizations, and local experts involved in planning, fire, forestry, fuels management, and emergency management, such as state and federal land management agencies, local governments, tribes, and fire departments or protection districts. | Provides information and feedback based on relevant expertise. | Attends presentations and stakeholder meetings; provides specialized data or input based on area of expertise related to CWPP topics. |
| Interested Parties | Organizations and individuals having an interest in planning and fire, such as landowners, homeowners' associations, neighborhood groups, watershed groups, land trusts, real estate professionals, developers, and builders. | Informed of the process and invited to presentations. | Attends presentations and stakeholder meetings; may be provided periodic updates or contacted on specific issues. |
| Public | All community members (including media). | Informed about CWPP process. | Invited to presentations, open houses, or other public opportunities, as determined and coordinated by working group. Refer to the CWPP Outreach and Engagement Workbook for more information. |



Whole Community Engagement in Action

Local governments across California are using various strategies to attain effective whole community engagement. Many counties focus on building and leveraging relationships to involve more community members in the CWPP process. For example, Nevada County spent an entire year building relationships before launching any CWPP planning meetings. County wildfire coordinator Alessandra Zambrano says, “We spent [that year] getting out into the community and learning from the community what they wanted to see from us and building that trust. In 2022 we [conducted] 172 outreach events between April and December.”

The Tahoe Resource Conservation District (RCD) already had a trusted network of Fire Adapted Community (FAC) ambassadors that they leveraged to help spread the word about the CWPP update process and how community members could participate. The



Nevada County staff set up at various public outreach events to engage the community and build relationships ahead of the CWPP process. Photo credit: Nevada County

ambassadors, who are local volunteers that educate and take leadership in their neighborhoods on wildfire mitigation activities, had well-established relationships with their fellow community members. They were able to amplify the messages of Tahoe RCD and effectively encourage residents to attend community meetings and participate in an online survey.

The Tahoe RCD also exemplifies using the engagement process to strengthen connections and build community capacity. Concerned about reaching the Spanish-speaking population in the basin, Tahoe RCD staff made sure to offer all their CWPP materials in both English and Spanish. They have also been attending *cafecitos*, which are small community events that are led by Spanish-speaking community members. They were able to include presentations on the



Nevada County residents attended various community engagement events to grow awareness for community needs around wildfire adaptation. Photo credit: Nevada County



Cheyenne Neuffer, Tahoe FAC Community Wildfire Protection Plan Program Coordinator doing outreach at the South Shore Earth Day Festival in April 2023. Photo credit: Tahoe RCD

CWPP process at one of these cafecitos and are using this engagement to increase relationships and long-term connections with groups that have not previously been involved in CWPP work.

Building relationships is an ongoing effort that looks different depending on context. In the City of Santa Barbara, participation efforts were hampered in 2020 during planning for the CWPP (published in 2021) due to its overlap with the worst impacts of COVID. However, the CWPP implementation team took participation seriously and held public meetings and outreach efforts to include citizens in each step of the execution process. As a result of the relationships and trust built, the City has seen enduring support for the implementation of their CWPP projects. As Wildland Specialist Mark vonTillow from the Santa Barbara City Fire Department said, “You can have the document, but if you can’t implement it, there’s no point in having the document.”

Engagement is about building lasting relationships with people who will stay involved throughout your process, not single touch points that don't endure. Napa County is seeing the value of bringing homeowners along for implementation as it connects to iterative and ongoing planning and new project generation. In reference to some projects on private land that required landowner agreement, Napa County’s Fire Administrator David Shew says, “engagement with property owners is very real and very tangible simply because we have to be there with them signing a piece of paper together.” Seeing the impact of their involvement in real time helps drive continued resident engagement. Shew references 21 local Fire Safe Councils (with ten more in formation) being consistent partners for planning public-private fuels treatments and securing the agreement of private landowners as needed, many of whom are members of those same councils.



A vegetation mitigation team chips as part of the Honda Valley project in the Santa Barbara CWPP. The city of Santa Barbara used implementation opportunities like this to strengthen community ties by inviting the public into ongoing meetings throughout the execution of their CWPP. Photo credit: City of Santa Barbara



The Ventura Regional Fire Safe Council strives to make it easy for local groups to participate in the development of their countywide and local CWPPs. Using lessons learned from collaborating with local community groups, consultants, and a wide network of partners, the Council is exploring offering stipends to local fire safe councils. The stipends are intended to support budgeting, planning, and outreach for CWPP development that is locally focused and contextually appropriate. This includes access to workshop training that will support these local groups in planning their CWPP process and making participation easier for their communities.

Truckee Fire Protection District demonstrates how to show the community that their input is being used. They incorporate a mixture of public meetings, surveys, and virtual meetings to collect feedback on their CWPP proposals.

All community comments that included a geospatial element will be digitized and included in the plan so everyone can see how their information was used. Truckee Fire Protection District staff will also follow up individually on those community priority projects to determine whether they can be led by local collaboratives or private landowners. This will be an ongoing part of their outreach and continued engagement and relationship building with the community.

Finally, the process is an ongoing, iterative project that needs to be evaluated and adjusted with community input along the way. Napa and Sonoma Counties both demonstrate one method for doing this by sharing an online database that is updated in real time with project progress and available for public contribution, helping support ongoing community engagement.

Additional Tips for Success

- Make engagement easy and fun. Offering fun, connection, and nourishment can often provide the necessary conditions for great public engagement. Providing a meal, drinks, and/or childcare can make or break some community members' ability to engage. Combining public engagement opportunities around other connection opportunities can also ease participation. Attaching small presentations, listening sessions, or town halls to community events, such as fairs and public concerts, can foster greater participation.
- Pay attention to windows of opportunity. To drive high engagement, consider planning outreach efforts and events around times of the year when residents are most likely to be interested in this work and available to attend meetings and events, such as second-homeowners' busy season and times of general high fire concern. Do not, however, concentrate all outreach efforts so strictly that it excludes residents who may inadvertently not be present or available in a small window of time.



- Prioritize direct, relationship-based communication. Social media and mass marketing have their place, but more focused outreach efforts will have a higher yield per contact. Nevada County uses an “email tree” to send important notices to partners who then include that information to their own audiences; at each level, this engages people based on relationships to trusted community leaders and organizations in a way that drives better engagement with messaging.

Key Resources

Association of Bay Area Governments

Association of Bay Area Governments’ [Best Practices for Equitable Engagement](#) provides best practices for creating an equitable engagement process. It includes examples from organizations in the Bay area as well as an appendix with resources and tools.

U.S. Forest Service

The U.S. Forest Service offers several publications to support whole community engagement. Their report, [Best Management Practices for Creating a Community Wildfire Protection Plan](#), shares best practices based on the experiences of 13 communities across eight states. Other publications can be found through their [extensive online library](#).

Interested in more CWPP best practices and guidance? Explore the entire CWPP Toolkit [here](#).

About the California CWPP Toolkit

The California CWPP Toolkit was co-developed by CAL FIRE’s Community Wildfire Preparedness and Mitigation Division, Community Wildfire Planning Center, Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network, and California Fire Safe Council.



Acknowledgements

We wish to thank the following people for their support of the development of this best practice:

Christopher Braden, City of Santa Barbara

Shari Gardner, Napa Firewise

Eric Horntvedt, Truckee Fire Protection District

Alex Keeble-Toll, Nevada County

Cheyenne Neuffer, Tahoe Regional Conservation District

Dillon Sheedy, Truckee Fire Protection District

David Shew, County of Napa

Mark vonTillow, City of Santa Barbara

Stephen Watson, Ventura Regional Fire Safe Council

Alessandra Zambrano, Nevada County

