

Collaborative Readiness: Preparing Landscapes and Communities to Receive and Recover from Wildfire

Federal and state agencies are increasingly expected to work with collaborative initiatives to meet national- and state-level policy goals related to wildfire mitigation. Collaboratives are increasingly recognized as important for addressing large landscape, cross-boundary challenges to forest resilience. Successful collaboratives can provide important functions to **prepare landscapes and communities to receive and recover from wildland fire** (see table on the right).

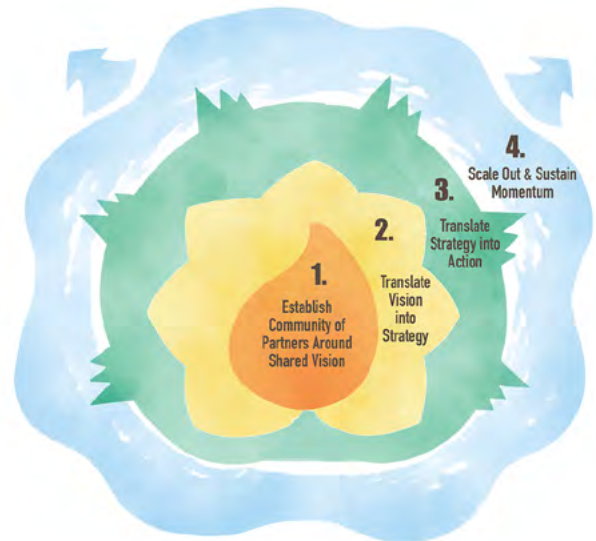
It takes time and resources for collaboratives to get to a point where they can successfully fulfill these important functions and receive and deploy large amounts of funding to achieve implementation at scale. Collaboratives provide value in different ways and require different resources and support as they develop. However, funders generally want to invest in proven success, which presents a challenge for equitable investment in early-stage collaboratives, or in landscapes with few resources to support collaborative capacity.

The Stages of Collaborative Readiness Framework seeks to address this challenge by providing stage-appropriate benchmarks for tracking progress and success of collaboratives as they evolve in their ability to prepare systems to live with wildfire. Few collaboratives follow a linear path through the stages, and readiness may look different in different places. Sensitivity to local context is essential for designing effective and durable cross-boundary and cross-scale collaboration.

This framework can help collaboratives and the entities that support them:

- **Inform:** self-assessment and adaptation, and enhance their ability to progress within and between stages over time;
- **Articulate:** their current capacity and justify funding needs;
- **Guide:** resource allocation between collaborative members and partners;
- **Inform:** reasonable expectations and outcomes at different collaborative capacity levels.

Functions of Collaboratives	
Identify, connect, and align interested parties	Gather and engage individuals and entities that have jurisdictional authority over, are interested in, or are affected by, wildland fire mitigation, response, and recovery.
Co-develop strategies at scale	Convene inclusive and transparent strategic planning processes that include spatial planning using decision support tools for risk assessment and prioritization.
Coordinate operations	Develop trust that other partners will follow through on implementation of co-developed strategies and share risks.
Facilitate science-informed, continuous learning	Build understanding about decision support tools and empower collaborative adaptive management.



Stages of Collaborative Readiness Framework

This summary provides an overview of the four stages of readiness and highlights intended outcomes and example benchmarks at each stage as a guidepost to inform progress and performance. For more detailed and complete information, refer to [Preparing landscapes and communities to receive and recover from wildfire through collaborative readiness: A concept paper](#).

Stage One: Partners coalesce and form community around a shared vision

There is a need for collaboration, but a period of basic preparation and situation assessment is required if infrastructure and relationships are not yet in place. With broad conceptual problem framing and



collaborative conveners identified, the initial partners begin communicating, building trust, and recruiting as needed to “fit” the complex challenge. Through an iterative process of engagement, participants explore problem definition, delineate the appropriate geographic boundaries, and zones of agreement. They develop their composite vision, mission, and goals for addressing risk, and effective response, and recovery from inevitable wildfires. Collaborators need to understand their decision space and work to obtain commitment from partners with decision-making authority over the lands and processes they are seeking to influence.

Outcomes of Stage One	Example Benchmarks (tangible indicators of progress)
The collaborative has sufficient internal capacity to convene and/or participate in collaborative processes.	Funded position/contractor to convene and organize: facilitate, design and document processes, write grants, etc.
The shared vision develops and coalesces along with membership.	Statements articulating a clearly defined problem and shared vision; codes of conduct and protocols to support an effective process.
Interests are identified and the key stakeholders are engaged (including jurisdictional leadership, science partners, community-connected partners, and historically excluded partners).	Written commitment from entities with decision-making authority (e.g., Memoranda of Understanding).
The collaborative has access to sufficient knowledge of local networks and expertise in critical subject matter to inform strategic planning in the next stage.	

Stage Two: Translate Vision into Strategy



With the collaborative partners in place, the group begins to co-develop a landscape-scale program of work that links spatial strategic planning tools and processes with tiered plans for community engagement, operational coordination, and adaptive management. The collaborative understands its decision space, and has the capacity, partners, subject matter expertise, data, and technology necessary to build integrated strategies. Science partners work with community-connected partners to build literacy about spatial decision support concepts, tools, and products, and the collaborative has a plan for communicating the shared strategy outside of the group.

Outcomes of Stage Two	Example Benchmarks (tangible indicators of progress)
The collaborative has identified crucial factors for achieving landscape resilience to wildfire, and developed plans that describe coordinated action to address those factors and achieve desired future conditions.	Strategic documents , including: spatial plans with coherent links to implementation, community engagement and outreach plans, and a strategy outlining steps and roles of the collaborative adaptive management process.
Planning processes result in the development of structures or products that represent shared meaning and knowledge and facilitate collaboration.	Collaboratively created: maps, subject matter presentations, shared glossaries, science or practice briefs/handbooks, monitoring protocols for assessing ecological and socio-economic outcomes of projects.
Frameworks to guide social learning are generated.	Products and protocols for community engagement: messaging/talking points, internal & external communications protocols, outreach products like infographics, tabling materials, presentations, etc.



Stage Three: Translate Strategy into Action

With collaborative commitments and strategic foundations in place, implementing partners begin coordinating operations with work on pilot projects, and a project portfolio begins to take shape. Partners work together on joint grant applications. The collaborative needs a way to absorb and distribute funding through a fiscal sponsor or a legal designation; configuration should fit local context and needs. The nature of collaboration may evolve during this stage as the focus shifts to implementation, but the importance of trust and community building remains high. Some form of common operating picture and periodic meetings can support cross-scale communication, project information sharing, and progress tracking.

Outcomes of Stage Three	Example Benchmarks (tangible indicators of progress)
Investment shifts towards implementation as the spatial strategy is rolled out on the ground, and completed projects are clearly connected to the landscape strategy.	A growing portfolio of completed projects .
Implementation schedules and locations are coordinated to magnify impact and efficiency.	Agreements about how to distribute acquired funding among partners.
Trust builds through incremental successes, and learning begins on the earliest pilot projects as the monitoring and adaptive management plan is tested and refined.	Monitoring and progress reports that go beyond acres treated to include outcomes focused metrics such as quality of acres, changes in fire behavior, or changes in human behavior.
Early metrics of social consent and results of outreach are tracked and shared.	



Stage Four: Scaling out and sustaining momentum

A mature collaborative can ideally begin scaling out with a multi-year, cross-boundary program of work. Sufficient structures and relationships are in place to allow the collaborative to navigate internal and external disturbance and change (such as personnel turnover or the emergence of a new external policy directive). The collaborative is able to maintain momentum with current partners while still bringing new partners—even old opponents—to the table. Collaboratives at this stage should strive to remain independent from (and not be perceived as subservient to) agencies, even as relationships with agencies improve. With increasing administrative needs, some collaboratives may choose to formalize into an organizational entity to increase stability and durability. However, this can change the dynamics of decision-making, participation, and shared governance, which may destabilize collaboration. The configuration of the collaborative must fit the context and work for the partners.

Outcomes of Stage Four	Example Benchmarks (tangible indicators of progress)
Planned projects have landowner agreements in place and are in alignment with relevant planning requirements.	A pipeline of shovel-ready projects across jurisdictions that is ready to roll out.
Collaborative priorities and strategies are institutionalized in NEPA or other agency planning protocols to increase accountability of agencies to collaborative partners and communities.	Collaboratively developed NEPA in place.
The collaborative convener has sufficient staff and is able to absorb and distribute funding, with agreements in place to do so—otherwise, group cohesion may be challenged.	Established budgeting process, identified funds, and strategy for managing funds across the partnership.
The group is supported by collaborative adaptive management such that the vision, strategies, and structure can shift and evolve with changing conditions while preserving the network. Long-term, the collaborative can contribute to landscape and community preparedness by advocating and building capacity for under-resourced partners as they collectively take on broader systemic challenges to forest resilience.	Monitoring and assessment results shared through tours, workshops, and other venues to identify needed adjustments, share lessons learned, and develop strategies for improvement.

To Read the Full Technical Report: C. Huayhuaca, A.S. Cheng, T.A. Beeton, J.S. Sanderson, A.W. Barton, A.D. Kimple, M.M. Colavito, J. Zebrowski, J. Dunn, N. vonHedemann, A.W. Slack., 2023. Preparing landscapes and communities to receive and recover from wildfire through collaborative readiness: A concept paper. Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes. https://cfri.colostate.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2023/09/SWERI_etal_2023_CollaborativeReadinessFramework.pdf



Illustrations developed by Lauren Brown, [LVB Studio](#)

Authors: Ch’aska Huayhuaca^a, Hannah Brown^a, John Sanderson^b

Layout by Angela Hollingsworth

^a Colorado Forest Restoration Institute, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO
^b Center for Collaborative Conservation, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO