

INCORPORATING TRIBAL PRIORITIES AND
TRADITIONAL ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE INTO
WILDFIRE CRISIS STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION:
A MID-COURSE ASSESSMENT

SEPTEMBER 4, 2024



OBJECTIVES

ASSESSMENT OBJECTIVES

- Examine Wildfire Crisis Strategy (WCS) implementation in partnership with Tribes
- Evaluate how Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and Tribal priorities are incorporated into WCS implementation
- Gather lessons learned for effective WCS implementation
- Identify additional capacity and workforce considerations to address in WCS implementation

A low-angle photograph of a forest with tall pine trees against a bright blue sky. The sun is visible in the upper right, creating a lens flare. In the lower left, a person wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a plaid shirt is seen from behind, looking up at a large pine tree. The ground is covered with dry brush and small plants.

APPROACH

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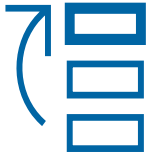

- 22 confidential discussions with Forest Service and Tribal personnel
 - Conducted virtually
 - 30 people involved
- Methodology:
 - Redacted identifying information
 - Identified themes in data
 - Organized themes by assessment goals
 - Compared data from Forest Service calls and Tribal calls
 - Gave participants review opportunity





FINDINGS

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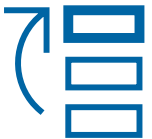
TOPIC	CODE
WCS As A Whole	
Incorporating Tribal Priorities and TEK into WCS Implementation	
Lessons Learned	

An aerial photograph of a forested landscape. The terrain is hilly and shows signs of logging, with numerous clear-cut areas and winding roads. The sky is filled with large, grey clouds, with a small patch of blue visible. A white rectangular box is centered in the image, containing the text "OVERARCHING FINDINGS" in bold, blue, sans-serif capital letters.

OVERARCHING FINDINGS

KEYS TO SUCCESS:

- Sustainable funding for forest management, including wildfire response and risk reduction
- Forest Service engaging in effective collaboration, communication, and coordination with Tribes
- Co-stewardship between the Forest Service and Tribes as the norm
- Increase in Tribally-managed cultural burning





FINDINGS: WCS AS A WHOLE

Prescribed Fire

Prescribed burning will reduce low level fuels and return the forest to its natural fire cycle.

Non-Commercial Thinning

Non-commercial thinning involves pruning branches, thinning ladder fuels, cutting small trees, and piling brush to be burned at a later date.

Commercial Thinning

Commercial thinning will reduce fuels in over-crowded tree stands and help sustain local economies.

Reforestation

Reforestation is desirable, fire resistant species will forest health.

FINDINGS – HOW WCS FITS INTO PARTICIPANTS' PRIORITIES

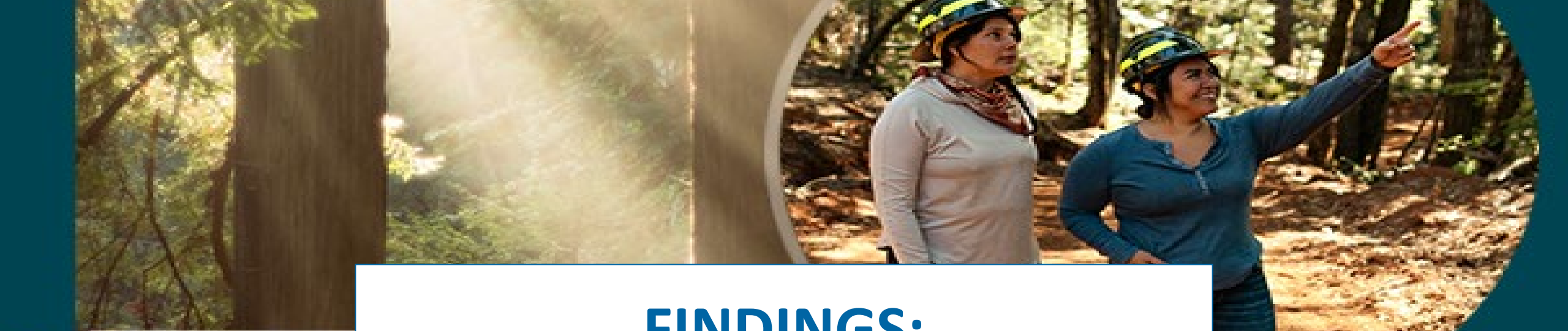
- Reducing risk of catastrophic wildfire – a major priority for all
- Done explicitly under WCS auspices – varies
- Forest Service participants:
 - Work underway for some time, but WCS takes it to next level
- Tribal participants:
 - 1st priority is resource work on reservation land
 - 2nd priority is ancestral territory on Forest Service lands



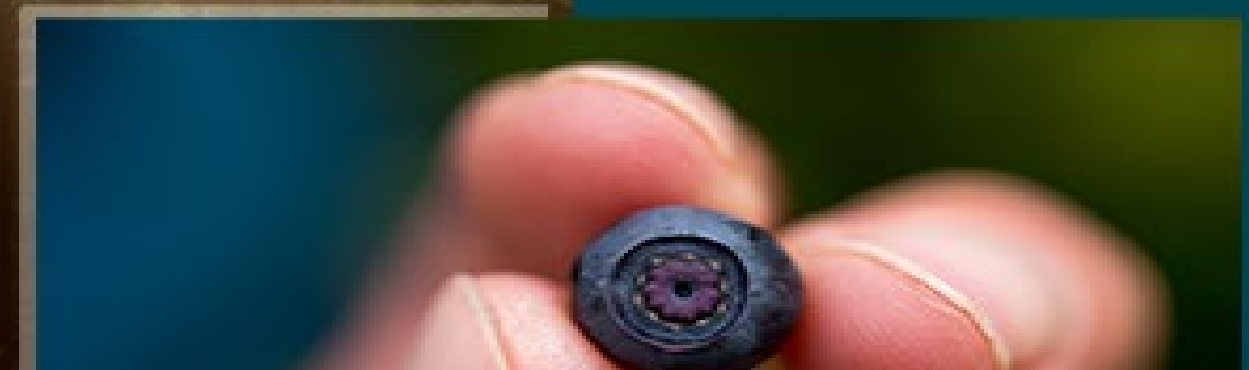
SUCCESSFUL WCS IMPLEMENTATION

- **Definition of success:**
 - Healthy forest conditions
 - Sustainable funding
 - Improved social dynamics
- **Participants suggested metrics for each (*see report*)**
 - Theme: “acres treated” is insufficient metric
- **Varying perspectives on progress toward “success”**
 - Yes – increased pace & scale; forest less dense; small diameter trees; fuel reduction in/around communities
 - Need to be more strategic, but 1-time funding is barrier to being more strategic (NEPA-ready focus; reluctance to hire)





**FINDINGS:
INCORPORATING TRIBAL
PRIORITIES AND TEK INTO
WCS IMPLEMENTATION**



FINDINGS: INCORPORATING TRIBAL PRIORITIES AND TEK INTO WCS IMPLEMENTATION

- Examples of Tribal priorities
- Defining success for incorporating Tribal priorities and TEK into WCS implementation
- Participant-suggested metrics for assessing progress
- Progress?
 - Examples of methods that have worked



EXAMPLES OF TRIBAL PRIORITIES

- Restore cultural burning and related songs and practices
- Enhance food plants
- Participate in managing forests
- Protect and nurture species for Tribal artisan use
- Protect water quality and quantity for aquatic species
- Protect hunting and gathering rights



SUCCESSFULLY INCORPORATING TRIBAL PRIORITIES AND TEK WOULD MEAN:

1. TEK is incorporated into Forest Service burn plans and other vegetative treatments
2. Forest Service engages in effective collaboration, communication, and coordination with Tribes
3. Co-stewardship (incorporating TEK) between the Forest Service and Tribes has become the norm
4. Tribes have resumed, and control their own use of, cultural burning

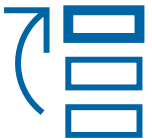


PARTICIPANT-SUGGESTED METRICS FOR SUCCESS ELEMENT 1

- TEK is incorporated into Forest Service burn plans and other vegetative treatments

METRICS OF SUCCESS

- Tribal priorities and TEK are integrated and evident in the Forest Service's project work and management practices from planning through project completion, monitoring, and maintenance
- Incorporation of Tribal priorities and TEK are success measures for FS program reviews
- Affirmation from Tribes that Tribal priorities and TEK have been incorporated



PARTICIPANT-SUGGESTED METRICS FOR SUCCESS ELEMENT 2

- Forest Service engages in effective collaboration, communication, and coordination with Tribes

METRICS OF SUCCESS

- “The Forest Service and Tribe are ‘as one’ in maintaining intervals for introduced fire to sustain a healthy ecosystem for all to use”
- The Forest Service has developed better relationships with Tribal nations – i.e. personnel are willing to show up, listen to each other, and intentionally cultivate relationships with one another



PARTICIPANT-SUGGESTED METRICS FOR SUCCESS ELEMENT 3

- Co-stewardship between the Forest Service and Tribes has become the norm with TEK incorporated into agreements.

METRICS OF SUCCESS

- Forest Service units are building relationships with Tribes, with an eye toward cultivating co-stewardship
- Co-stewardship is standard practice



PARTICIPANT-SUGGESTED METRICS FOR SUCCESS ELEMENT 4

- Tribes have resumed, and control their own use of, cultural burning.

METRICS OF SUCCESS

- Cultural burning is supported, and Tribes have authority to conduct cultural burns
- Fuel loading has been reduced to levels where risks associated with cultural burning are acceptable
- Bureaucratic barriers to Tribes engaging in cultural burning have been reduced or removed



PROGRESS IN INCORPORATING TRIBAL PRIORITIES AND TEK INTO WCS IMPLEMENTATION

- Responses from both Forest Service and Tribal personnel varied from:
 - “not seeing a great deal of progress yet”
 - to
 - “seeing a great deal of progress”

- Variation reflects differences between landscapes, Forest Service units, and Tribes



EXAMPLES OF PROCESSES BY WHICH TRIBAL PRIORITIES AND TEK ARE BEING INCORPORATED INTO WCS IMPLEMENTATION

- Tribal personnel helping write treatment prescriptions on Forest Service lands, doing layout, identifying where to put fire lines, what to protect
- Participation by both Forest Service and Tribes in shared communities of practice (e.g., Fire Learning Network)
- Tribally led workshop on TEK in WCS context



A wide-angle photograph of a desert landscape. In the foreground, a paved road curves to the left, with a white pickup truck and a white sedan driving away. The terrain is arid, with sparse, dry vegetation and small shrubs. In the distance, a range of mountains is visible under a dramatic, overcast sky with large, dark clouds. A white rectangular box with a blue border is centered in the middle of the image, containing the word "QUESTIONS?".

QUESTIONS?

LESSONS LEARNED: FACILITATIVE FACTORS

[Mentioned by both Forest Service and Tribal personnel]

- Shared goals / authority to implement them
- Funding (IRA, BIL) and fundraising skills
- Enough Tribal Liaisons with the right skills
- Strong relationships and communication
- Systems to support Forest Service / Tribal Collaboration
 - MOUs, consultation process, correspondence procedures, quarterly meetings
- Legal protections for sensitive Tribal information
- Personnel
 - From Forest Service: Enough skilled Grants & Agreement (G&A) staff
 - From Tribal personnel: Hiring more people knowledgeable about Tribes



LESSONS LEARNED: CHALLENGES

[Mentioned by both Forest Service and Tribal personnel]

- Forest Service personnel turnover
- Forest Service personnel's varying levels of knowledge about Tribes (legal status, decision-making, resource limitations, cultural traditions)
- Inadequate communication, trust, and transparency
- Staff capacity (time and funding constraints)



LESSONS LEARNED RELATED TO WORK CULTURES

[Mentioned by both Forest Service and Tribal personnel]

- Many Forest Service team members lack understanding of Tribes (vulnerable to assumptions and unconscious bias)
- Bureaucratic processes slow project implementation. Hard to navigate one's own bureaucracies let alone the others
- Mismatch between Forest Service and Tribal worldviews and governance
 - Different perspectives on managing forest lands (government land and multiple use vs. cultural heritage and traditional ecological knowledge)
 - Different ways of knowing (quantitative / empirical vs. lived experience / oral tradition)
 - Different views of risk



LESSONS LEARNED: SYSTEMS, PROCEDURES, AND STRUCTURES (CONT'D)

Agreements (Positive)

Tribal participants reflected positively on agreements that give Tribes more autonomy and support co-stewardship/co-management

- Example: Via TFPA with USDA 638 Agreements
- Example: Under Farm Bill 2018, USDA 638 allows Forest Service to pay the Tribe directly.



LESSONS LEARNED: SYSTEMS, PROCEDURES, AND STRUCTURES (CONT'D)

Agreements (Positive)

Forest Service participants reflected positively on agreements that:

- Help streamline engagement with Tribes and stand the test of time
- Support co-stewardship
 - Example: “Good Neighbor Agreements allow the Forest Service to operationalize co-stewardship.”
 - Example: “The Tribal Forest Protection Act was a game changer. It gave us the authority to do co-stewardship agreements.”
- Meet Tribes where they are, capacity-wise



LESSONS LEARNED: SYSTEMS, PROCEDURES, AND STRUCTURES (CONT'D)

Agreements (Challenges):

- Being unable to leverage agreements to increase staffing
- Bureaucratic barriers (BIA + USFS agreement procedures – could agencies collaborate better?)
- Not allowing Tribes to keep income from projects
- Lack of clarity around co-stewardship
- Limited capacity (Tribes; contracting personnel)
- Extra scrutiny (unconscious bias) re: oversight of Tribal grants





RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Strengthen workforce capacity
- Secure sustainable funding
- Collect / disseminate key organizational learnings
- Provide policy, guidance, and social license
- Provide procedural flexibility
- Learn together



A. STRENGTHEN WORKFORCE CAPACITY

1. Remove barriers and support cultural burning.
2. Offer and incentivize Forest Service training on knowledge and skills key to effective collaboration with Tribes.
3. Explore ways to hire Tribal members as Forest Service employees
4. Provide 1+ Tribal Liaison per Forest, with right knowledge/skills.
5. Hire G&A staff at Forest level.
6. Publicize variety of ways for Forest Service and Tribes to share labor and build capacity.

B. FUNDING

1. Secure base funding for sustainable wildfire risk reduction work (beyond 10 years).
2. Assess ability to compensate Tribal personnel for work on Forest Service land – remove barriers to doing so or publicize existing methods.
3. Allocate staff time for relationship-building and collaboration with Tribes.

C. COLLECT/DISSEMINATE KEY AGENCY LEARNINGS:

1. Types of authorities and agreements to use for different goals
2. How to:
 - a. Do co-stewardship
 - b. Support cultural burning
 - c. Incorporate TEK into Forest Service work and systems
 - d. Utilize Tribal Liaisons time for maximum benefit
 - e. Support culture and behavior change within the agency to better partner with Tribes

D. POLICY, GUIDANCE, AND SOCIAL LICENSE:

1. Assess and either develop or disseminate for:
 - a. Leadership commitment, strategy for working with Tribes
 - b. Ways agency can maximize decision space for Tribal partners
 - c. How to identify priority treatment locations and timing
 - d. Wilderness Area treatment options

2. Pursue further problem-solving on how to:
 - a. Make WCS more strategic
 - b. Remove barriers to cultural burning
 - c. Minimize Forest Service personnel turnover
 - d. Strengthen Federal agency coordination to reduce burden to Tribes

E. ASSESS FOREST SERVICE ABILITY TO PROVIDE INCREASED PROCEDURAL FLEXIBILITY

1. Aligning monitoring and reporting requirements when one Tribe has multiple Forest Service agreements
2. Allowing flexibility in timeframe for spending funds
3. Discretion to offer one-time waivers on variety of agreement requirements
4. Use of Forest Service funds (like TFPA) for Forest Service personnel to do work on Tribal land if Tribe wishes
5. Creating a mechanism to certify Tribes to help with National Historical Preservation Act surveys for cultural resources associated with both non-Tribal cultures and Tribal cultures

F. LEARNING TOGETHER

1. Look for opportunities to create projects together
 - With Forest Service nearing completion of shovel-ready projects, begin to conceptualize new projects, working with Tribes from beginning.
 - Showcase successes in doing this
 - Incentivize this
2. Learn from successful relationships
 - Learn from / share how Forest Service units and leaders have partnered with Tribes for mutual benefit.

A photograph of a logging site. In the foreground, a large truck is heavily loaded with a stack of cut logs. The logs are stacked high, showing their circular ends. The truck is parked on a dirt and gravel road. In the background, several workers are visible. One worker in the foreground is wearing a bright green hard hat and a blue hoodie, looking towards the logs. Another worker in a black jacket and dark hard hat is standing further back. The sky is overcast with grey clouds, and distant mountains are visible in the background. The overall scene depicts a busy logging operation.

DISCUSSION