

**INCORPORATING TRIBAL PRIORITIES AND TRADITIONAL ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE INTO  
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE U.S. FOREST SERVICE WILDFIRE CRISIS STRATEGY:**

**An Interim Assessment**

**--EXECUTIVE SUMMARY--**

**Purpose and Approach**

The USDA Forest Service (Forest Service) in partnership with the Intertribal Timber Council (ITC) and the Morris K. Udall and Stewart L. Udall Foundation's National Center for Environmental Conflict Resolution (National Center) conducted an interim assessment of how Forest Service and Tribal partners are implementing the Wildfire Crisis Strategy (WCS). Assessment findings will be used to facilitate further incorporation of Tribal priorities and Traditional Ecological Knowledge into future WCS implementation. Toward that end, the assessment objectives were to:

1. Examine WCS implementation in partnership with Tribes.
2. Evaluate how traditional knowledge and Tribal priorities are incorporated into efforts to reduce wildfire risk through WCS implementation and related land management policies and activities.
3. Gather lessons learned for effective implementation of WCS during its remaining years.
4. Identify additional capacity and workforce considerations to address in WCS implementation.

In total, National Center staff facilitated conversations with 30 participants from May to June 2024 that represented Tribal and Forest Service personnel engaged in wildfire risk reduction work across the country. Many of these participants were connected to a WCS landscape, a term for areas characterized by the Forest Service as high risk for purposes of prioritizing WCS funding and implementation; however, some interviews were conducted with Tribal and Forest Service representatives in high-risk areas that are unaffiliated with WCS landscapes to better understand the impact of the WCS on this work and these relationships. ITC and the Forest Service (Wildfire Risk Reduction Infrastructure Team (WRRIT) and Office of Tribal Relations (OTR) jointly identified potential dialogue participants based on geographic locations, affiliation with WCS landscapes, and formal agreement status between Tribes and Forest Service units. Responses were anonymized and collated to explore overarching themes. Those are explored more in the sections below.

Information sent to participants to introduce this assessment and guide conversations can be found in Appendices A and B.

**Key Findings**

**Connection to the Wildfire Crisis Strategy**

All participants identified reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfire as a priority, whether explicitly under the WCS or more generally, however not all participants felt connected to the WCS itself. Those who felt less connected to the strategy included:

- a. Tribal personnel from Tribes who had already been driving their own wildfire risk reduction efforts well before the establishment of the WCS;
- b. Tribal personnel who had not yet had an opportunity to be deeply involved in WCS implementation because the Forest Service units near them were prioritizing projects already set for implementation (those that had already gone through the NEPA compliance process); and/or
- c. Participants not associated with WCS landscapes.

In addition, some Tribal personnel shared that their respective Tribes' workforce capacity constraints meant that they needed to prioritize work on reservation land first and ancestral territory within Forest Service lands second.

### **Defining Success of the Wildfire Crisis Strategy and How to Assess Progress**

When participants were asked how they would define success for the WCS, responses fell into three categories:

1. Improved forest condition (healthier, more fire-resilient landscapes);
2. Sustainable funding for wildfire risk reduction work; and
3. Effective collaboration, communication, and coordination among cross-boundary partners.

Participants had numerous suggestions for how to measure success in incorporating Tribal priorities and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK)<sup>1</sup> into WCS implementation. Examples include looking at whether catastrophic wildfires are becoming less frequent, less intense, less damaging, and more manageable; whether treatments are timed and located for maximum positive impact; whether wildfire risk reduction work is supported by an increase in base funding to continue this work into the future; and whether the Forest Service and Tribes have established and are utilizing clear points of contact for effective collaboration with one another.

### **Reducing Risk**

Most participants reported progress on reducing risk of catastrophic wildfire under the WCS and felt that the funding influx from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) had enabled increased pace and scale towards that effort. However, the degree of progress reported varied widely among participants. Conversations on the degree of progress of WCS implementation varied from not seeing a great deal of progress yet to seeing a great deal of progress. Several points came up repeatedly:

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<sup>1</sup> TEK is also referred to as Indigenous Knowledge (IK). The terminology of TEK was used in this executive summary and findings based on usage from participants. For additional information and definitions of TEK and IK, see the following resources: [USFS's Planning Rule update in the Federal Register effective May 6, 2024 \(36 CFR Part 219\)](#) and the November 2022 OSTP [CEQ Guidance for Federal Departments and Agencies on Indigenous Knowledge](#)

- Despite variation in perspectives, most felt that the pace and scale of progress are still far from adequate; all noted room for improvement.
- Numerous participants pointed out that the wildfire crisis cannot be solved in 10 years and that longer-term, sustained funding is needed to deal with the scale of the challenge.
- The WCS needs to become more strategic (identifying and treating priority areas within a landscape to maximize pace and scale and establishing meaningful metrics to measure progress).

### **Incorporating TEK and Tribal Priorities into the Wildfire Crisis Strategy**

Participants shared four elements important to defining success in incorporating Tribal priorities and TEK into WCS implementation. If the Wildfire Crisis Strategy is to be considered successful in meeting these objectives, one would see the following four phenomenon:

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

Participants also had numerous suggestions for how to assess progress toward these conditions. For some Forest Service units, the above conditions are aspirational, but others are demonstrating success in at least some of these areas. However, success was not universal and even where a Forest Service unit may be successful in incorporating the Tribal priorities and TEK of one Tribe, they may be unsuccessful with others. The “Opportunities and Obstacles” section below includes ideas to move the needle on this work and a discussion of some of the federal and other policies and practices getting in the way of success.

### **Opportunities and Obstacles**

Opportunities presented here focus on ways to successfully incorporate Tribal priorities and TEK into implementation of the Wildfire Crisis Strategy and wildfire risk reduction more broadly, but they may also be applicable to work more broadly between the Forest Service and Tribes.

Two keys to success identified in this work included **facilitating the ability for Forest Service and Tribal fire personnel to work together and learn from each other** and **Forest Service incorporation of Tribal priorities into a formal co-stewardship agreement**. Additionally, adequate funding to support the work, ongoing communication, Forest Service line officer leadership style, Tribal liaisons, and staff willing to show up, listen, and intentionally cultivate relationships were identified as enabling conditions towards successful incorporation of Tribal priorities and TEK into WCS implementation.

Obstacles to success included:

- Federal resistance to extending co-stewardship into true co-management of forests.
- Difficulty in obtaining credentialing and permit requirements for cultural burning.
- Forest Service continued emphasis on acres treated and focus on shovel-ready projects that are too far along for meaningful incorporation of Tribal input for WCS implementation.
- Personnel turnover within the Forest Service and (to a lesser extent) among Tribal personnel.
- Varying levels of understanding by Forest Service staff regarding Tribes, Tribes' decision-making processes, and Tribes' workforce capacity constraints.
- Misalignment between Forest Service and Tribal governance approaches.

### **Recommendations and Next Steps**

Participants offered insights and shared lessons learned towards enhancing success in incorporating Tribal priorities and TEK into WCS implementation and overall WCS implementation. These insights and recommendations include:

- **Strengthen workforce capacity.** Remove barriers / encourage and support cultural burning. Offer and incentivize Forest Service training on knowledge and skills key to effective collaboration with Tribes. Explore possible Public Lands Corps Authority, giving Direct Hiring Authority for Forests or piggybacking on BIA's Direct Hiring Authority via Intergovernmental Agreement. For each Forest, provide 1+ Tribal Liaison who has right knowledge and skills. Fund and hire G&A staff at Forest level to support Tribal agreements. Publicize the variety of ways Forest Service and Tribes can share labor and build capacity.
- **Funding.** Secure base funding for sustainable wildfire risk reduction work (beyond 10 years). Assess ability to compensate Tribal personnel for work on Forest Service land – remove barriers to doing so or publicize existing methods. Allocate staff time for relationship-building and collaboration with Tribes.
- **Collect / disseminate key organizational learnings.** Topics on which there is a need for widespread awareness include types of authorities and agreements to use for different goals and how to do co-stewardship, support cultural burning, incorporate TEK into Forest Service work and systems, utilize Tribal Liaisons for maximum benefit, and support culture and behavior change within the agency to better partner with Tribes.
- **Assess and either develop or disseminate existing policy, guidance, and social license.** Topics on which further clarity is sought include leadership commitment and strategy for working with Tribes, ways agency can maximize decision space for Tribal partners including co-management and land transfers, how to identify priority treatment locations and times, and Wilderness Area treatment options. Further problem-solving is needed to make WCS implementation more strategic, remove barriers to cultural burning, minimize Forest Service personnel turnover, and strengthen Federal agency coordination to reduce burdens to Tribes.
- **Assess Forest Service ability to provide increased procedural flexibility.** Examples that participants suggested for agency consideration include aligning monitoring and reporting

requirements when one Tribe has multiple Forest Service agreements; allowing flexibility in timeframe for spending funds; discretion to offer one-time waivers of selected agreement requirements; and use of TFPA funds for Forest Service personnel to do work on Tribal land if Tribe wants that; and creating a mechanism to certify Tribes to help with National Historical Preservation Act surveys when the cultural resources are associated with non-Tribal cultures as well as Tribal cultures.

- **Creating projects together.** Taking advantage of the fact that Forest Service units may be nearing completion of their shovel-ready project inventory and beginning to conceptualize new projects. This is an opportunity to involve Tribes from the earliest stages of project development.
- **Learning from and modeling successful relationships.** Capitalizing on Forest Service units and leaders who are successful in partnering with Tribes and facilitating sharing of this work with others in the agency.

The information presented in this executive summary will be expanded into a full report that will be shared with participants, Tribal contacts, and Forest Service personnel with highlights shared and opportunity for discussion at a virtual roundtable engagement in September 2024. The full report will outline the factors that participants identified as helping to facilitate success in incorporating Tribal priorities and TEK into WCS implementation. In addition, the report will include identified obstacles to progress, participants' suggestions for strengthening the incorporation of Tribal priorities and TEK into WCS implementation, and suggestions for indicators of progress in this regard.

Participant feedback from these conversations and roundtable engagement will be used to frame future work with Tribes and the Forest Service in implementing the WCS and other wildfire risk reduction efforts.

## Appendix A: Assessment Overview Shared with Interviewees

### INTERIM ASSESSMENT OF WILDFIRE CRISIS STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION

#### WITH RESPECT TO TRIBES' PRIORITIES:

#### Objective, Methods, Interview Topics, and Anticipated Use of Interview Data

- I. **Objective:** The Intertribal Timber Council (ITC) and USDA Forest Service seek to conduct an interim assessment of how Forest Service and Tribal partners are implementing the 10-year Wildfire Crisis Strategy. This assessment will inform a report to current and future Tribal and Forest Service partners as part of a 2024 Roundtable session convened by the Forest Service and ITC. The assessment will be based upon approximately 30 confidential interviews with current program participants and others. Interviews will be conducted by staff of the National Center for Environmental Conflict Resolution (National Center), which is a program of a small independent federal agency called the Morris K. and Stewart L. Udall Foundation ([www.udall.gov](http://www.udall.gov)).

The assessment will:

5. Examine WCS implementation in partnership with Tribes.
  6. Evaluate how traditional knowledge and Tribal priorities are incorporated into efforts to reduce wildfire risk through WCS implementation and related land management policies and activities.
  7. Gather lessons learned for effective implementation of WCS during its remaining years.
  8. Identify additional capacity and workforce considerations to address in WCS implementation.
- II. **Background:** In December 2021, the ITC and USFS entered into an agreement to support Tribal engagement and involvement in the implementation of the USFS's 10-year strategy to address the wildfire crisis in the places where it poses the most immediate threats to communities.<sup>2</sup> In 2022, the ITC and USFS convened a National Intertribal Roundtable discussion regarding the implementation of the WCS, identifying [key areas for Forest Service and Tribes to consider in implementing the Wildfire Crisis Strategy](#). After a year of progress in collaborating with partners across 10 initial landscapes to address wildfire risk to infrastructure and communities, the Forest Service added [11 more landscapes to the program in early 2023](#). These 11 additional landscapes included significant Tribal interests. Also in 2023, the ITC and USFS convened a dialogue series to

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<sup>2</sup> ["Confronting the Wildfire Crisis: A Strategy for Protecting Communities and Improving Resilience in America's Forests."](#)

discuss workforce capacity and development issues identified as concerns for implementation of the WCS (See [Highlight Summary](#)). The Wildfire Crisis Strategy is 20% through implementation.

- III. **Methods:** The ITC and Forest Service are partnering with the National Center to develop the assessment process, conduct interviews and collate the final report. These entities coordinate their efforts through the Wildfire Risk Reduction Implementation Team (WRRIT), facilitated by the National Center.

National Center staff will conduct 1 on 1 interviews with Forest Service personnel and Tribal implementation partners from a representative group<sup>3</sup> of participants from the 21 current Wildfire Crisis Strategy landscapes. As needed, additional interviewees from adjacent at-risk areas will be considered to provide a national overview of Wildfire Crisis Strategy implementation considerations. Based on these interviews, National Center staff will create a summary report of findings and present this report to Tribes and Forest Service staff at a virtual Roundtable which will occur in 2024. Interviewees will be identified by the National Center, Forest Service and ITC team. Interviewees will be identified based on the following factors:

- **Geographic diversity.** The Team will look for Tribes working with the Forest Service throughout the United States. Most interviewees will be identified from Tribes located on (or in proximity to) the 21 Wildfire Crisis Strategy landscapes. A select number of Tribes will be invited for interviews from areas outside the Wildfire Crisis Strategy landscapes, with a focus on those who are actively working to address wildfire concerns.
- **Representation across Forest Service and Tribal staff.** Interviewees will be identified to allow for representation across Tribal and Forest Service partnerships. This diversity in staff will be included to provide balanced and comprehensive feedback. Interviewees could include, for example:
  - a. Tribal Natural Resource and/or Cultural Resource Staff, Tribal Foresters, Tribal leadership, Tribal administrative support staff, and wildfire and fuels staff; and
  - b. Forest Service Line Officers, grants and agreements staff, Tribal Liaisons, and landscape managers.
- **Tribal land base, size, and staffing arrangements.** Interviewees will be identified to allow for a diversity of Tribal land holdings, capacity, and implementation ability and priorities. In addition, we will seek to interview those from Tribes with direct service Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) forestry/fire programs, and those without, to explore challenges associated with cross-boundary management when Tribal staff are BIA employees.

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<sup>3</sup> For budget and time considerations, not all participants will be interviewed. However, the team will identify a representative cross- section of Tribal and Forest Service individuals to interview.

- **Partnership methods.** Interviewees will also be identified to include those Tribal and Forest Service partners working together through various processes. These are likely to include, for example, those working under co-stewardship agreements, approved proposals under the Tribal Forest Protection Act (TFPA), or other partnership agreements and those not working within an agreement or contract structure.
- **ITC Linkage.** Interviewees affiliated with Tribes are not limited to just those Tribes who are members of ITC.

All interviews will revolve around the interview questions listed in the attached document, which focus on current Wildfire Crisis Strategy implementation tactics and methods. However, the interviewer may concentrate on a subset of these questions for a particular interviewee and may ask unique follow-up questions depending on answers to these questions. Topics explored through the interview questions include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Landscape management activities and planning;
- Limitations to Wildfire Crisis Strategy implementation posed by current Forest Service or Tribal management plans and/or policies;
- Tribal roles versus Forest Service roles in implementation.
- Administrative factors (challenges, obstacles), including issues on reporting, transfer of funding, and coordination of capacity;
- Measures of success; and
- Lessons learned.

We understand that each Tribe and Federal agency has unique protocols for participating in efforts initiated by Federal and other external partners. We trust that Tribal government staff and partners invited to participate in an interview will follow their respective leadership's protocols for accepting or declining the invitation. Similarly, we trust that Forest Service personnel invited to participate in an interview will determine what approvals they may need to obtain to accept the invitation. We are looking for interviewees to speak from their own individual experience working on Wildfire Crisis Strategy implementation or other wildfire risk reduction initiatives, rather than officially on behalf of their Tribe or employer. If we can provide any further information to assist you in determining how to respond to this request, please let us know and we will do our best to provide it.

- IV. Anticipated Use of Interview Data:** The National Center will maintain records of the individual interviews until report completion, collating results of interviews to identify themes, areas of commonality and areas of difference consistent with the assessment objectives. Each assessment interview will be considered confidential -- the results of all interviews will be presented as themes and opportunities without attribution of comments to the individual (unless explicitly requested by the interviewee and appropriate for the findings). These notes are considered National Center work products.

For the purposes of this assessment, the final report is intended to be shared with a broader audience (see details below), and if shared will become a public record. However, standard



National Center processes allow interviewees to review the report before it is distributed to a larger audience to ensure the report does not attribute comments to individuals and maintains the confidentiality of interviewee's comments, to the best for our ability. The National Center does not disclose interview notes, and maintain those as mediator work products, subject to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) exemptions noted below. The National Center will do everything in its capacity to maintain the confidentiality of any specific information, including interview notes, and documents shared as confidential and maintain them as such. As a federal entity, the National Center is subject to the FOIA. Under 5 U.S. Code §552(b)(3), a communication between National Center staff as the neutral mediator/facilitator and a party may not be disclosed if that communication is confidential and made during a conflict resolution-related proceeding. The types of confidential discussions that occur during an assessment and as part of mediated disputes are customarily exempt from FOIA if they are not shared outside the mediation team (i.e., National Center staff) and related to documents we prepare internally to conduct our work (i.e., work product). However, the exemptions for protecting the information collected via interviews and documents collected by the assessment team are varied with respect to whether they are shared with others, whether they were developed by us, whether there are additional protections on that data or documents (e.g., National Historic Preservation Act), among other factors. While information collected during an assessment is unlikely to be released via a FOIA request, there is a remote possibility the information will not be able to be protected.

After completing the assessment phase and confirming distribution of the assessment report with interviewees, the National Center will work with the Forest Service and ITC in developing a report or presentation that protects interviewee anonymity. This report will be presented via webinar to facilitate discussion on this interim evaluation and next steps for Tribes and Forest Service interested in Wildfire Crisis Strategy implementation.

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

### Interim Assessment of Wildfire Crisis Strategy Implementation

#### with Respect to Tribes' Priorities:

#### Proposed Questions

#### A. Background Questions:

1. Do you feel connected to the Wildfire Crisis Strategy?
2. Are you involved in Wildfire Crisis Strategy implementation?
  - a. If so:
    - i. What is your role?
    - ii. How does your work on this fit into your priorities?
  - b. If not:
    - i. Are you involved in other efforts to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire?
    - ii. Can you tell me a bit about what you do in that area, and how much of a priority it is for you?

#### B. Program Success:

1. If after 10 years, the Wildfire Crisis Strategy was fully successful, what would that look like?

##### Possible prompts:

- a. How would we know it was a success?
- c. What would you expect to see on the ground?
- d. What might success look like for:
  - i. The land?
  - ii. People and communities?
  - iii. Tribes, in particular?
  - iv. Forest Service, in particular?
3. Implementation of the Wildfire Crisis Strategy has been underway for 2-3 years now. Are you seeing any of those indicators of success that would suggest things are moving in the right direction?

#### C. Tribal Priorities and Indigenous Knowledge: From your experience working with the Wildfire Crisis Strategy (or wildfire risk reduction):

1. Do you see ***Tribal priorities*** being incorporated into that work?
  - a. If so:
    - i. Can you provide examples?
    - ii. What factors have helped make that possible?
  - b. If not:
    - i. Do you have insights about obstacles to that happening?
    - ii. Ideas about how those obstacles could be overcome?
  
2. Do you see ***indigenous knowledge*** being incorporated into that work?
  - a. If so:
    - iii. Can you provide examples?
    - iv. What factors have helped make that possible?
  - b. If not:
    - v. Do you have insights about obstacles to that happening?
    - vi. Ideas about how those obstacles could be overcome?
  
3. Linking back to our earlier questions about what success might look like after the 10-year implementation period or currently proposed work, do you have any thoughts about indicators that would demonstrate:
  - a. That Tribal priorities had been incorporated during Wildfire Crisis Strategy implementation?
  - b. That indigenous knowledge had been incorporated?
 

Possible prompt: What might a fire adaptive landscape that supports tribal priorities and incorporates indigenous knowledge look like?
  - c. Are you seeing any of these indicators?
  - d. Are these indicators of success shared with your partners?
  
- D. Lessons Learned: We'd like to delve more deeply into your insights about what factors will help the Wildfire Crisis Strategy be successful, and what factors might get in the way of that. We're open to hearing what you have to say about relationships, systems, procedures, structures, policies, work culture, different kinds of intergovernmental agreements – anything that you have seen either foster success in cross-boundary wildfire risk reduction work or impede success. So I'll ask you about those things, one by one, and please feel free to mention other things that we haven't thought of!
  1. ***Working relationships between Federal and Tribal personnel*** – what's important? What gets in the way?
    - Possible prompt for Tribal interviewees: Have you had access to a Tribal Liaison from the Forest Service? If so, has there been an impact on implementation of

Tribal priorities and indigenous knowledge within the wildfire risk reduction efforts/Wildfire Crisis Strategy?

2. **Work culture** (for example, expectations about how one should do one's work, or behave in the working environment; things you should always do, or should never do) – anything that you have seen in this regard as being really helpful, or really problematic?
3. Are there any **systems, procedures, or structures** related to your wildfire risk reduction work that stand out in your mind as helpful to the success of the Wildfire Crisis Strategy? Or that have gotten in the way?
  - Possible Prompt: Are there structures that you know of that can be put in place to support good collaboration between different jurisdictions or entities working on wildfire risk reduction, specifically between:
    - Federal agencies; and
    - Federal agencies and Tribes?
  - Possible Prompts:
    - In your work with the Wildfire Crisis Strategy, have you seen examples of really good coordination between Federal agencies and Tribes?
    - Have you seen examples where the Federal agencies involved in Wildfire Crisis Strategy implementation were very much in sync with one another or not in sync at all? Does this seem to affect the likelihood that Tribal priorities and indigenous knowledge will be incorporated into Wildfire Crisis Strategy implementation? In what way?
      - Which agencies have you seen do this well? What type of personnel were involved – i.e., Line Officers, Tribal Liaisons, others?
      - For federal interviewees, any insights about what helps cross-federal agency collaboration occur effectively?
4. We're interested in understanding whether having a formal agreement in place between a Tribe and the Federal government makes a difference in the likelihood that Tribal priorities and indigenous knowledge will get incorporated into Wildfire Crisis Strategy implementation / wildfire risk reduction, and if so, what types of agreement best support that goal. We have several questions about that for you:
  - a. In your Wildfire Crisis Strategy / wildfire risk reduction work, is the Forest Service supporting Tribal participation in implementation through agreements, contracts, or other means?

- b. If so, what type of agreement (e.g., a cooperative agreement, a co-stewardship agreement, an approved proposal under the Tribal Forest Protection Act (TFPA), a Memorandum of Understanding, a combination of some of these, other)?
- c. If you have an agreement:
  - i. Does it include funding? Have you received the funding?
  - ii. Does it require a match?
  - iii. Does the agreement cover the scope of work that is needed?