

UTAH'S NEW WILDLAND FIRE POLICY AND FIRE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

photograph by Jason Curry



Mike Ulibarri at the White House WUI roundtable.

In the 2016 legislative session, Senate Bill 122—Wildland Fire Policy Updates was passed unanimously by the Utah Legislature! This bill gave way to a new, progressive, and comprehensive wildland fire policy for Utah.

The creation of SB 122 was a collaborative effort led by the Utah Division of Forestry, Fire & State Lands (FFSL) and involving statewide partners from the

Utah Association of Counties, the Utah League of Cities and Towns, the Utah State Fire Chiefs Association, fire departments, various policy workgroups, and many others.

The wildland fire problem has gained national attention. The attention is focused on several questions, such as:

- Why have the costs of wildfire suppression increased from 18% of the US Forest Service's budget to over 50% and growing (Lueck and Yoder, *Clearing the Smoke from Wildfire Policy: An Economic Perspective*)?
- What efforts are being taken to control this problem?
- What are local communities that are building further into wildlands and thereby creating more wildland-urban interface (WUI) doing to help?
- Is local government using current WUI building codes?
- Are communities and fire departments following the National Cohesive Strategy and working with partners to build programs such as

Ready, Set, Go! and develop Community Wildfire Preparedness Plans (CWPP) to identify and implement wildfire prevention, preparedness, and mitigation actions?

- Who will pay for the increased costs of firefighting and, more important, who *should* be paying?
- How do we create ownership of the wildland fire risk in every community and how do we reduce that risk?

All of these questions and more were discussed at a roundtable discussion of wildland-urban interface fires I had the privilege of attending earlier this year at the White House as a representative of FFSL and the Department of Natural Resources. The discussion group represented fire officials from every type of fire service in our nation as well as professionals in climatology, insurance, and forestry, the Secretary of the Interior, and staff from both the president's and vice president's offices. I was proud to share how Utah has proactively addressed nearly all of the discussion questions with the passing of the new fire policy legislation. The eyes of the country are on us to

see how Utah's wildland fire policy and new fire management system are implemented and how the long-term effects of wildfire in Utah might change. Utah—all of us responsible for wildland fire management—is truly leading the way.

The New System

The new fire management system shifts the focus from reactive fire suppression and outdated standards of assessment to proactive risk reduction and scientifically sound measures of risk and threat. Under the old laws and state system, participation in the State Suppression Fund was based on property values, an admittedly poor way to gauge wildfire risk and responsibility. To support the new system, FFSL has built the Utah Wildfire Risk Assessment Portal (UWRAP) (discussed in the Fall 2016 article by FFSL's Nate Barrons) to more completely assess risk and an "eligible entity's" expectations for participating in the new fire management system.

In a nutshell, the new system is based on the simple premise of risk reduction wherein the state will pay the costs of large and extended attack wildland fire ("catastrophic fires") in exchange for local government implementing prevention, preparedness, and mitigation actions that are proven to reduce the risk and costs of wildland fire in the long run.

How It Works

Every county, city, and eligible special service fire districts can opt in to the new fire management system, which takes effect January 2017. Participating entities (those that opt in) are annually evaluated through UWRAP to identify their wildfire risk per acre, using a dollar value for medium- and high-risk acres. This value is then combined with the ten-year historic fire cost average within the jurisdictional boundary of the participating entity as tracked by FFSL. The resulting risk assessment and historic fire cost average are combined to provide an annual "participation commitment" for the participating entity.

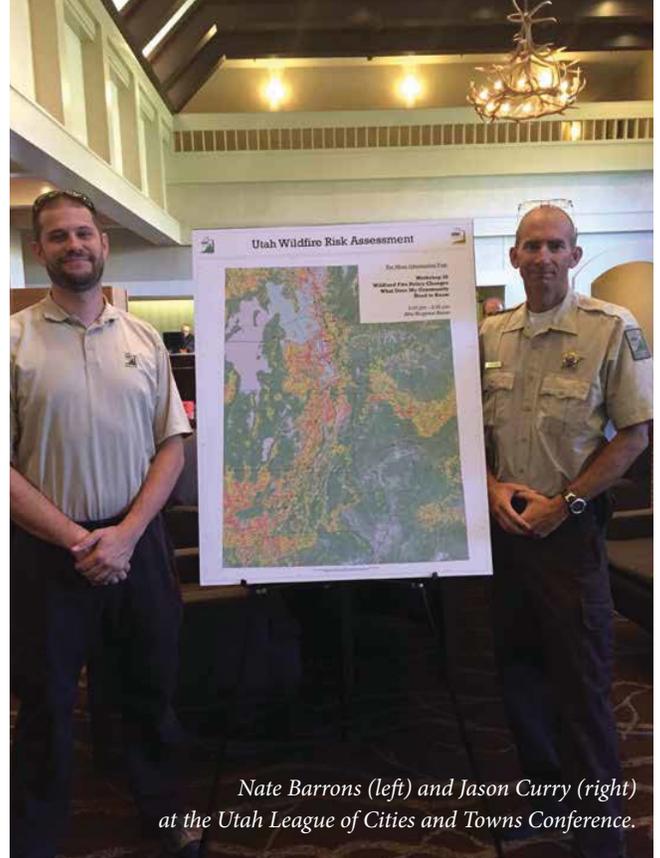
The participation commitment is now the value of wildland fire risk reduction work that each participating entity will be responsible for implementing in their

communities. The commitment value cannot be paid to FFSL or the state; instead, it will be met by prevention, preparedness, and mitigation work—cash or in-kind—accomplished at the local level.

An eligible entity that decides to opt in to the new system will sign a five-year cooperative agreement with FFSL as well as create an Annual Financial Statement detailing its participation commitment. The participating entity can then work with local FFSL area staff and its WUI coordinator to begin the CWPP process. Every participating entity, with the help of local FFSL staff, must create a CWPP within two years of opting in to the system and keep that plan updated into the future. The CWPP will help a participating entity prioritize the risk reduction projects for its jurisdiction and communities. Local governments will now be actively helping FFSL to reduce the risk of wildfire—a win for every community at risk of catastrophic wildfire!

The local fire department can also be part of this process, with input into the CWPP and increasing wildfire preparedness through red card training and certification, annual firefighting refreshers, and purchase of equipment that will enhance their wildland firefighting initial attack (IA) capabilities. The new fire policy requires that the participating entity and its associated fire department make the best possible IA to control and contain wildland fires in this early phase. Fires controlled in IA do not count against a participating entity's historic fire cost average or towards its annual participation commitment.

Once these criteria are met, if a wildfire escapes IA, the participating entity can authorize the Delegation of Fire Management Authority and Transfer of Fiscal



Nate Barrons (left) and Jason Curry (right) at the Utah League of Cities and Towns Conference.

photograph by Whitney Norton

Responsibility to the state. When this delegation occurs by the participating entity, the incident will be managed in a unified command environment and the extended attack cost of the fire will be paid through the State Suppression Fund.

With local communities taking responsibility for reducing their wildland fire risk and the state assuming the liability of catastrophic wildland fire costs, Utah's new fire management system is the "comprehensive statewide wildland fire prevention, preparedness and suppression system" the legislature was searching for in 2015. Over time, this new, progressive approach will reduce the risk and costs of wildland fire in Utah.

In the next issue, I'll share in greater detail what the new fire management system and participation commitment could look like in a local jurisdiction.

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