



Social science can help communities better live with wildfire through research on human behavior, institutions and governance, community dynamics, and social networks.

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# CoMFRT

Co-Management of Cross-Boundary Fire Risk Transmission

**A partnership to identify strategies and address cross-boundary fire risk**

## Case Studies of Fuels Reduction and Co-Management

Designing and implementing fuels treatments on public lands adjacent to communities is one strategy community members and agencies can use to co-manage wildfire risk. CoMFRT researchers are exploring the **factors and conditions that influence support or opposition to fuels management** approaches among community members as one set of case-studies surrounding wildfire risk management.



**Virginia Ridge, WA, a Forest Improvement Timber (FIT) sale site managed by the Washington Department of Natural Resources.**

### Approach

Researchers used a case study approach of fuel treatments proposed by different agencies in the Methow Valley of North Central Washington.

Treatments include:

- **The Lost Driveway hazardous fuels reduction project**, a hand-thinning prescription of 2,400 acres around Mazama, WA implemented by the Forest Service and the National Forest Foundation, with support from a Joint Chiefs project.
- **The Mission Restoration Project**, a proposed U.S. Forest Service thinning project of 50,000 acres in the Libby Creek and Buttermilk drainages south of Twisp, WA.

### Partnership Vision

*Wildfire is no longer seen as disastrous or catastrophic for communities, but becomes “more like rain”—normal and expected, but sometimes problematic in its intensity.*

- **The Virginia Ridge Forest Improvement Timber (FIT) Sale**, led by the Washington Department of Natural Resources (WA DNR) on 735 acres of state land northeast of Winthrop, WA.

Researchers conducted **54 semi-structured interviews** with 61 individuals in 2018 across these projects. Participants included residents, agency or government professionals, and members of local non-profits or collaboratives.

### Preliminary findings

- **Support or opposition to fuels treatment stems from alignment with local culture.** Portions of the Lost Driveway hazardous fuels reduction project were supported by Mazama residents because of its light prescription that preserved the forest aesthetics and recreational opportunities important to community members. Meanwhile, concern over forest aesthetics and a perspective that the Virginia Ridge project was a commercial timber harvest created initial opposition to that effort.
- **Opportunities for cross-boundary efforts exist, but they require careful coordination and consistency.** Key resident leaders were necessary in each project to build and foster local community buy-in for coordination. Long-term mitigation on nearby properties will require additional coordination and a dedicated consultant workforce as initial action already had begun to wane and many residents could not perform thinning themselves.
- **Effective fuel treatment planning requires strategic consideration of opportunities and circumstances among agency professionals.** Key agency organizers of the Lost Driveway project understood that the location of proposed treatments, local support, and additional funding created a strategic opportunity to complete a project. However, it also meant that the treatments conducted might not remove as much fuels as is necessary to adequately reduce risk.
- **Transparent decision making at early stages and at periodic intervals are essential for fostering community support.** Residents opposed the initial Virginia Ridge timber sale given concerns that too many trees would be removed. Select community members promoted a narrative that the fuels treatment would not provide benefit to locals, and disputed the science behind it, which influenced opposition.
- **The need for co-management of fuel treatments may be variable.** Mazama residents provided little input on the development and implementation of the Lost Driveway project, but remained highly supportive because it aligned with community culture and values. Co-management was less necessary in that case. Dialogue and planning was necessary among agency professionals and affected residents in the Virginia Ridge and Mission Restoration cases. Respondents felt both projects should include discussion of complimentary action by private landowners.
- **The form of agency response can lead to coordination or foster longer-term opposition.** DNR officials, including the commissioner of public lands, effectively engaged residents surrounding the Virginia Ridge project and incorporated their concerns into an updated plan. Exclusion of concerned communities from the collaborative organizing action for the Mission Restoration Project led to an elongated timeline for implementation and the potential for future litigation.



**Libby Creek, WA, where parts of the Mission Restoration Project will be implemented.**

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