



# Challenges to Collaboration

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## The Collaborative Mix

Bringing the right people into a collaborative process can be difficult. Potential collaborators must all feel they have something to gain to justify investing resources, sharing knowledge, and perhaps compromising on goals and actions. Wildland fire has the advantage of being a common enemy—fuels reduction is a mutual goal around which players can communicate and establish trust.

Inevitably, though, there are challenges to collaboration. They generally fall into three categories:

- Participatory capacity—the willingness of individuals to participate, communicate, and follow through;
- Community capacity—the collective resources and skills within a community to support collaboration; and
- Institutional capacity—the rules and regulations, culture, and characteristics of an organization that affect its ability to collaborate.

Some of the common challenges that individuals, communities, and institutions face in collaboration are:

**Lack of resources.** Potential participants share a concern about a lack of time, dollars, or skills to fully participate in a collaborative process.

**Lack of technical expertise.** Managers, scientists, and citizens sometimes feel they lack the education, experience, or training to participate. This perception may apply to the project, such as fuels management, or the collaborative process.

**Concerns about process.** Citizens, environmentalists, and Federal land managers may not participate because they see the collaborative process as exclusive or unfair. They might have concerns about the transparency of the process. A transparent process is one in which interested members of the general public can follow group activities, such as how the group frames problems, compromises on issues, and prioritizes activities.

**Inadequate communication.** Communication can be a challenge at several levels. When breaking into working groups, participants may inadvertently fail to update the larger team on activities and decisions. Local stakeholders who are not actively involved in the collaborative process may not feel that they are being adequately informed about the team's efforts and progress. On yet another level, when team members representing agencies do not keep agency colleagues informed about the team's progress, agency support for the project might diminish.

**Legal considerations.** Federal land managers sometimes believe that laws or regulations limit or prevent their participation. Private property owners may worry

*Synthesizing  
Scientific  
Information  
for Fire and Fuels  
Project Managers*

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Communication can be a challenge on several levels. Keeping all participants and stakeholders informed of the team's efforts and progress is critical. Photo: V. Sturtevant

that collaboration might require divulging natural resource conditions on their land, which could result in new or additional regulations.

**Potential slowdowns.** Citizens have the power to question a public project and appeal decisions made during the project, potentially slowing or even stopping it. People who have had experience with such a project, may not want to participate again.

**Concerns about goals.** Prospective participants may be concerned about the way issues are framed and the resulting goals. Some may not buy into the project's goals

as they are articulated. In addition, many contemplating involvement may be concerned about whether the process will succeed in achieving individual, agency, or societal goals.

**Concerns about trust.** Some citizens resist getting involved because they may not trust other participants.

**Concerns over constituency support.** Local officials may not participate because they believe that constituency support is lacking. Individuals who are asked to participate as representatives of a group may not participate because they feel they lack the authority to act on behalf of that group.

Though these challenges can be significant, it is important to remember that experience shows they are not insurmountable.

## Source

Sturtevant, Victoria; Moote, Margaret Ann; Jakes, Pamela; Cheng, Antony S. 2005. Social science to improve fuels management: a synthesis of research on collaboration. Gen. Tech. Rep. NC-257. St. Paul, MN: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, North Central Research Station. 84 p. Available online at <http://ncrs.fs.fed.us/pubs/viewpub.asp?key=3123> [2006, August 25]. For a hard copy, contact Pamela Jakes at [pjakes@fs.fed.us](mailto:pjakes@fs.fed.us).

## Additional Collaboration Fact Sheets

*Challenges to Collaboration* is one of a series of four fact sheets on the topic of collaboration and fuels management. See also *Benefits of Collaboration*, Social Issues Fact Sheet 9 (RMRS RN-21-9-WWW); *Stages of Collaboration*, Social Issues Fact Sheet 10 (RMRS RN-21-10-WWW); and *Keys to Successful Collaboration*, Social Issues Fact Sheet 12 (RMRS RN-21-12-WWW).

## Social Science Team Fact Sheets

Look for fact sheet topics from the Social Science Team including information on developing personal responsibility for fuels reduction, communicating fire hazard, topics for community fire plans, guidelines for community education, and the "golden rule" for communicating fire hazard to people.

Fuels Planning: Science Synthesis and Integration is an inter-agency research/management partnership to support the Ten-Year Fire Plan, led by Russell T. Graham, RMRS, and Sarah M. McCaffrey, NCRS.

## Fuels Planning: Synthesis and Integration

This fact sheet is one in a series being produced as part of a larger project supported by the USDA Forest Service to synthesize new knowledge and information relevant to fire and fuels management. Fact sheets address topics related to stand structure, environmental impacts, economics, and human responses to these factors. Information in the fact sheets is targeted for the dry forests of the Inland West, but is often applicable across broad regions of the country. For more information, please visit our Web site at: [www.fs.fed.us/fire/tech\\_transfer/synthesis/synthesis\\_index](http://www.fs.fed.us/fire/tech_transfer/synthesis/synthesis_index)