

National Fire Plan fuels treatments target the wildland–urban interface in the western United States

The article “Implementation of National Fire Plan treatments in the wildland–urban interface in the western United States” (1) is misleading because it is based on wildland–urban interface (WUI) designations not used by federal agencies or their state and local partners. Moreover, by omitting any examination of the allotment of program monies to WUI and non-WUI areas, it misses a significant opportunity to measure program priorities. As a result, its conclusions fail to provide any new insights to improve protection for the WUI.

Methods matter. Federal agencies use collaboratively developed WUI designations consistent with congressional direction to work with state and local governments (2). Doing so permits inculcation of local and regional conditions flowing from the geographic diversity in vegetation, topography, settlement, and other factors influencing the interplay of fire and people. Community Wildfire Protection Plans and similar documents used by the agencies capture these variations [the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (P.L. 108-148) calls for the preparation of Community Wildfire Protection Plans]. Governments at all levels reaffirmed this approach to WUI identification in December 2006 (3). Thus defined, the WUI accounted for 45% of treated acreage in the western United States during the period 2004–2008 (calculated from annual state fuels treatment reports that show WUI acres accounted for 1.5 million of the 3.3 million treated hectares; see ref. 4).

Schoennagel et al. (1) identify the WUI by employing a mechanistic approach that bypasses significant consideration of local conditions as well as input from knowledgeable on-the-ground sources. Only 3% of all acres treated were in the WUI as they see it. But is it their interpretation of the WUI that counts? Examination of a federal program should be done using its own parameters. Recasting terms may be a way for observers to suggest how a program should operate, but it is not appropriate when they are evaluating or describing how a program is operating.

Like methods, spending also matters. Schoennagel et al. (1) acknowledge its importance as a measure of priorities. They write that “federal policies stipulate that significant resources should be invested in the WUI” and that the Healthy Forest Restoration Act “stipulates that 50% of fuel reduction resources nationwide be allocated to the WUI” (1). Why, then, does the reader not learn that the WUI accounted for an average of 64% of annual program expenditures for fiscal years 2004–2008 at the Department of the Interior (5)? Contrary to the impression created by the article, federal fuels treatments emphasize WUI protection.

Finally, the conclusions add nothing to our understanding of protecting communities from wildland fire. They champion fire-adapted communities; use of fire resistant construction, evacuation planning, and restricted residential development; expanded ability to treat fuels across land ownerships; and sharing fire-suppression cost sharing across government agencies and between public and private bodies. Each conclusion is old news to the fire community.

The hazardous fuels program is one of our most significant federal land management undertakings and rightfully attracts a great deal of attention from many quarters. Scholarly contributions will improve its operation in direct proportion to their analytic rigor, relevance to vital questions, and originality.

Allan Fitzsimmons¹

3192 Rivanna Court, Woodbridge, VA 22192

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¹To whom correspondence should be addressed. E-mail: afitzsimm@aol.com.