



OFFICE OF  
**INSPECTOR GENERAL**  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

## **WILDLAND URBAN INTERFACE: COMMUNITY ASSISTANCE**



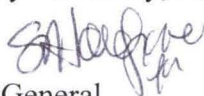


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JUL 30 2010

Memorandum

To: Rhea Suh  
Assistant Secretary for Policy, Management and Budget

From: Mary L. Kendall   
Acting Inspector General

Subject: Evaluation of Wildland Urban Interface Community Assistance Function  
(Report No. ER-EV-MOA-0012-2009)

This memorandum transmits our evaluation of the Department of the Interior's (DOI) activities pertaining to wildland urban interface areas (WUI) where private and federal properties intersect and where wildland fires may ignite without warning.

We conducted this evaluation in response to concerns expressed by the U.S. Congress and the Office of Management and Budget. DOI's four fire agencies—Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, and Bureau of Indian Affairs—spend approximately one billion dollars annually to reduce wildland fire damages. Even so, DOI's wildland fire management programs received the lowest rating possible from OMB's Performance Assessment Rating Tool (PART): "Results Not Demonstrated."

In response to these concerns, we assessed DOI accountability through its wildland fire management programs to determine whether or not adequate funding guidance and oversight had been provided to help WUI communities take advantage of existing federal resources, specifically National Fire Plan grants, to reduce fire risks. Overall, we identified various community initiatives that successfully had accessed National Fire Plan grants across the United States. We also recognized that this number could have increased significantly had clear, consistent guidance been available from DOI.

Our report contains four recommendations that, if implemented, would improve visibility, accountability, and communication associated with the National Fire Plan grants. We would appreciate being kept apprised of the actions DOI has taken on our recommendations. Please provide a written response to this office within 30 days, identifying plans to address the findings and recommendations cited in this report.

Should you have any questions about this report, please do not hesitate to contact me at (202) 208-5745.

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## Results in Brief

In 2009, Congress requested data on DOI wildland fire activities to better understand costs associated with federal firefighting, as well as damage to private property. In response to this request, we reviewed federal wildland fire activities implemented since our 2006 review of DOI's hazardous fuels reduction program. Particularly, we focused on the impact of federal fire money on wildland urban interface communities, which are those areas where the destruction of fire extends from federally managed lands to the homes and businesses of U.S. citizens.

We found that federal efforts to help communities develop and fund community wildfire protection plans (CWPP), encouraged under the 2003 Healthy Forest Restoration Act, had produced tangible fire mitigation impacts at the community level and had established effective federal - community networks that assisted firefighting and boosted prevention through community education. In spite of benefits to communities, however, the return on federal investments could have been multiplied had DOI provided full guidance and oversight through its wildland fire management programs administered out of its bureaus. Lacking this guidance, investment in discretionary community assistance grant projects varied, depending on the level of bureau and community involvement, making it a challenge to attain their full potential for effectiveness. The community assistance function suffered for lack of national and Departmental advocacy, program planning, and an effective reporting mechanism to track the impact of federal grants on wildfire mitigation in wildland urban interface areas. We have concern that without such national level advocacy, cooperative efforts between communities and federal firefighting networks and related funding may diminish or disappear over time.

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# Introduction

## Objective

Through National Fire Plan grants, DOI has provided monies to fund community wildland fire mitigation projects. We visited 20 projects in wildland urban interface (WUI) areas to determine the success of DOI cooperative efforts with communities abutting federal property in reducing their wildland fire risks. WUI refers to the transition zone where human development meets and intermingles with undeveloped wildlands.

## Background

Our nation's wildland fire problems have worsened during the past decade. Environmental conditions (including drought) and the growing number of homes abutting wildlands have increased opportunities for fires to destroy personal property and endanger lives. Federal monies appropriated to agencies managing wildfires have more than doubled since the late 1990s, most recently averaging approximately \$3 billion annually. Four DOI agencies, as well as the Forest Service in the Department of Agriculture share responsibility for fighting fires on federal property.

In 2003, with the passage of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act, Congress encouraged collaboration among communities, local and state governments, and the Federal government to mitigate and fight fires that could damage private property and lead to loss of life. This legislation, in part, funded hazardous fuels reduction projects for communities that developed CWPPs.

In 2006, the Federal 10-year Strategy Implementation Plan, known as the National Fire Plan, further emphasized the importance of protecting at-risk properties in WUI areas. The plan facilitated grant funds, provided to communities through cooperative agreements, which could be used to cover expenses associated with creating and implementing CWPPs.

Responsibility for wildland fire management at DOI has been delegated to four bureaus: (1) Bureau of Land Management (BLM), (2) National Park Service (NPS), (3) U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and (4) Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). Collectively, in fiscal year (FY) 2009, these bureaus spent approximately \$130 million, to reduce fuel loads in wildlife urban interface areas, chiefly those portions that are federally managed. A significantly smaller amount, approximately \$30 million (data derived from the National Fire Plan Operations and Reporting System), distributed through the National Fire Plan grants, went to WUI communities that have applied for the funds since passage of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act.

In FY 2009, DOI's Office of Wildland Fire Coordination (OWFC), which has overall functional responsibility for policy and budget matters, allocated



appropriation monies to each of DOI's four fire agencies, headquartered at the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) in Boise, Idaho. DOI's four fire agencies then disseminate their hazardous fuels reduction budget to their respective bureau counterparts at regional or state levels. It is here, at these levels, that decisions regarding the amount of grant funding for communities and bureau investment are made.



Figure 1. California roadside view of a wildland urban interface community.

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# Findings

## **Absence of DOI Ownership Reduces Program Visibility**

OIG found that while the National Fire Plan's WUI community assistance grants are a successful component of DOI's wildland fire management effort, the effort succeeds chiefly through the commitment of individual efforts. As part of the fire management budget, WUI grant funds flow to bureaus from OWFC but without accompanying guidance and direction. Lacking centralized oversight, the process has become increasingly de-centralized. Indeed, BLM regional officials we spoke with expressed confusion about program ownership at the national level.

National bureau fire managers agreed with OIG that there has been an ongoing leadership void. After we brought this issue to their attention, BLM detailed various community assistance lead persons from states with successful, innovative grant programs through its oversight programmatic level to attempt to fill the void. In taking such a step, BLM eventually expects to be able to share more broadly across states and regions any successful community-based fire mitigation actions worthy of emulation. In the active wildland fire states of California and Idaho, we found that BLM regional leadership has generated successful community assistance grant programs for WUI areas.

To verify the effectiveness of WUI community assistance grants as well as the networks through which they operate, OIG visited 20 WUI projects funded through the grants. At these locations, we found regional bureau, state and local entities excited about the benefits of projects funded through National Fire Plan grants and cooperative agreements. Local community representatives and non-profit entities praised bureau officials who demonstrated ability to sustain community relationships that transcended individual projects. In the event of a wildland fire threatening WUI communities, these networks and contacts with the community can result in improved communication and firefighting responsiveness, saving lives and property. These networks also help promote readiness and fire mitigation through improved community awareness.

Nevertheless, we found that no national or departmental level reporting mechanism facilitated the sharing of lessons learned from grant accomplishments. What worked in one area might have to be reinvented, either successfully or not, in another. Whatever sporadic grant monitoring and reporting occurred overall resulted from individual bureau regional personnel who assumed responsibility for it.

Again, a primary area of confusion expressed by NIFC and regional bureau officials was program ownership. Some officials believed federal responsibility to be secondary to community responsibility because grassroots community effort spearheads CWPPs and related grant projects. In the field, however, OIG

observed that the most successful local efforts funded through the National Fire Plan grants demonstrated collaboration with bureau officials up the line, who promoted and sustained grant success. In California and Idaho, the two states in which our 20 reviewed projects operated, bureau officials actively collaborated with communities through direct involvement as well as grant funding.

Beginning in 2006, all new fire plans in California had to comply with the federal definition of CWPPs in order to receive grant funds. Then 2 years ago in California, BLM leadership began a push for countywide CWPPs to be developed and included as part of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's plan. In Idaho, BLM also encouraged countywide CWPPs, with annual plan updates. BLM's Idaho region further requires that all fuels hazardous treatment projects funded through community assistance grants be identified in a CWPP. BLM reports that currently all of Idaho's 44 counties are covered by a CWPP predominantly funded by DOI.

We found it interesting that committed local federal personnel in alliance with community grassroots leadership have contributed to highly successful firefighting mitigation activities grounded in CWPPs. Simultaneously, these same federal employees noted the absence of national level program leadership, a void that they attempted to fill through local best practices at the community level. Overall, we found that successes depended more on individuals than on consistent agreed-upon protocols that guided the process. National level ownership of DOI's WUI community assistance function is critical to ensure consistent successes across the program and increased visibility in the federal, state and local community.

#### **Recommendation**

- I. Assign program ownership for WUI community assistance grants and projects at the Departmental and national bureau level.

### **Poor Tracking Mechanism Contributes to Inability to Aggregate Program Successes**

WUI community assistance activities suffer from a lack of National Fire Plan grant program objectives and measures to define levels of optimal performance. Overall, DOI's wildland fire management program, functionally administered through OWFC, has not provided adequate national policy guidance to regional bureau officials who manage the grants and cooperative agreements facilitating WUI community activities. Absent such guidance, officials are forced to originate their own stopgap measures.

We found no guidance from OWFC, and subsequent little or no consistent bureau policies or guidance that addressed community assistance program management or objectives, monitoring or performance measurement to determine the impact of



the grants and cooperative agreements. Even though a centralized NIFC database with a WUI community assistance module does exist, the database module is weak, used inconsistently, and ineffectively designed to capture performance data on key activities. The database, the National Fire Plan Operations and Reporting System (NFPORS), is the interagency management tool used by DOI fire agencies and the Forest Service to track and report accomplishments for hazardous fuels reduction and burned area rehabilitation. Currently, the WUI module is treated as a minor element. In reality, a greater focus on the module would help to demonstrate the benefits of community assistance work as a fire management tool.

Absent critical national level guidance, bureau officials in Western states that include California and Idaho have chosen to fill the gap by developing their own specific grant management guidelines and program objectives to template standardization and capture successes. In California, BLM, FWS, NPS, and the U.S. Forest Service, have partnered with the California Fire Safe Council (CFSC), a non-profit organization, to administer the community assistance grants program.

California regional bureau officials have developed a relationship with the CFSC that has resulted in a streamlined application and management process freeing bureau staff from grant management and writing assistance and allowing more work hours to be used for fire education and collaboration. CFSC has spelled out each bureau's criteria for treatments on Federal and non-Federal lands, as well as bureau requirements for matching contributions for cooperative agreements.

In Idaho, BLM established its initial grant program objective to be the development of CWPPs for all communities in the state. This was accomplished in 2004. The BLM Idaho grant program occurs through cooperative agreements with state Resource Conservation and Development Areas. These are non-profit organizations originally defined and fostered by the Forest Service. Idaho's BLM fire mitigation and education specialists work with these non-profits to determine which projects to fund.

Both examples, which demonstrate state level successes, might be useful to other parts of the wildland fire community if such information had a means through which it could be aggregated up and guidance provided out to the fire community. Indeed, OIG found that the NFPORS WUI community assistance module does not provide an adequate platform for monitoring, oversight, and performance measurement. Specifically, it primarily collects acre-based information, failing to comprehensively document outreach activities that also contribute to WUI successes and demonstrate the robustness of community efforts.

This imbalance is largely due to the dominance of two performance measures for hazardous fuels reduction: number of acres treated and associated costs of treating acres. OWFC and bureau officials told us that because few non-federal acres are treated in WUI, and the costs of treating these acres are high, spending limited resources on the National Fire Plan grants is not a priority.

The current system also fails to measure the number of at-risk communities with CWPPs developed and funded with DOI grant assistance. Of the 69,930 communities at risk, according to the National Association of State Foresters' *Communities at Risk Report FY 2009*, only 5,567 had developed or were included in a CWPP or equivalent plan. These communities with CWPPs, however, had no discernible link back to their funding sources, leaving OIG unable to determine how many communities had developed CWPPs using DOI grant assistance. Nevertheless, DOI's 2009 budget justification still states that 78 percent of WUI acres targeted for treatment are identified in locally-developed CWPPs, an increase from 2008 of about three percent. This figure illustrates the absence of a clearly articulated link between acres treated and the number of communities occupying this acreage that have a CWPP relationship with DOI.

Current strategic performance measures track acres treated in the WUI identified through CWPPs, a laudable approach to demonstrating expansion of interest at the community level. However, the absence of a feedback loop to reflect Federal dollars contributed to CWPP development (including monies and their labor equivalents referred to as sweat equity that are contributed by communities as matching funds for grants received) undermines the wildland fire management program's ability to determine the real value of the effort to communities. The National Fire Plan cites two specific performance measurements for tracking community assistance progress and both of these measurements rely on information obtained from CWPPs (i.e., the number and percent of treated WUI acres identified in CWPPs, and the number and percent of communities-at-risk both covered by a CWPP and reducing their wildland fire risk). By extension, the number or percentage of communities at risk that DOI has helped with funding and CWPP development would be a logical target performance measure for National Fire Plan grants.

This absence of national or aggregate reporting requirements for WUI community assistance accomplishments not only contributes to the program's low visibility but also demonstrates the absence of national program objectives. Essentially the effort remains ad hoc. No DOI requirements for WUI community activity reporting exist to strengthen and reinforce guidance from the bureaus. Indeed, in the absence of direction from OWFC, bureau guidance also fails to specify who should review progress reports, financial reports, and success stories generated at the state and local levels, although, bureau officials in California, for example, note that field officers do prepare community assistance project success stories for use by the press as well as local and regional agencies in the event of a highly publicized fire. We believe that underreporting or failure to report community successes at the DOI national level and to capture this as reportable data (including community-contributed matching funds and labor) may discourage further investment in these cooperative grants.

We found that outreach and educational activities are not recorded in any measurable manner in NFPORS even though these activities are key aspects of

fire grants' community assistance function. BLM officials in Idaho told us that 90 percent of WUI community assistance-funded activities involve outreach and education rather than fuel mitigation treatments. Non-acre-based activities such as education and outreach also are inconsistently entered by field personnel because NFPORS guidance does not define how to measure these activities. Non-acres based implementation actions include: community outreach events, home evaluations/assessments, media and public information events, monitoring, training residents, data collection, coordination, and distribution of educational materials. OWFC and bureau officials told us that these activities are difficult to quantify or measure compared to acres-treated. While this may be true, we believe that capturing non-acre-based activities is critical to provide the fullest picture of WUI successes achieved with Federal dollars.

A new multi-year contract for the modification of NFPORS was negotiated by OWFC in October 2009 with a base year cost of approximately half a million dollars, but with no plans to improve the WUI module's collection and reporting activities. As the system administrator explained, it is not a matter of cost, but rather the absence of any direction or guidance indicating the need to develop effective WUI performance measurements, tracking and monitoring standards, and reporting tools.

#### **Recommendations**

2. Strengthen the interagency NFPORS WUI community assistance module, including issuance of comprehensive guidelines for users, defined project activity elements, and performance monitoring and tracking tools.
3. Establish consistent WUI community assistance grant policies and guidance addressing program objectives and performance measures.

## **Program Outreach and Communication Tools Underused**

Local community assistance outreach and education products fostered through National Fire Plan grants have been ineffectively disseminated, again due to the absence of national level direction. As a result, duplicated effort and wasted resources may occur. Information and product sharing promotes collaboration, envisioned originally by the National Fire Plan and Healthy Forests Restoration Act. To date, programmatic decentralization has encouraged grassroots ownership. Now, national level coordination is needed to make possible the efficient sharing of lessons learned and products developed among the ever increasing number of communities occupying WUI.

OIG found that in the absence of clear national level direction or measures, some bureau regions still create effective outreach programs that could benefit and

inform other WUI communities and stakeholders. To facilitate such sharing, regions have formed collaborative working groups and used nonprofit organizations to manage and cultivate community outreach and education. In addition, bureau fire mitigation and education personnel have teamed up with grant specialists and local stakeholders to create vibrant programs. The result has been increased fire prevention as well as an enhanced community image for the Federal government. Increased information sharing across regions and bureaus could only be strengthened through the creation of a central repository for outreach products maintained at a national level.

One example of an effective program funded through BLM grants and distributed by local stakeholders is the “Take Responsibility” outreach effort in California, which includes brochures and flyers easily adaptable to other localities. A second example, also from California, is the Butte County Fire Safe Council “Fire on the Ridge” program, which includes materials and lesson plans for 5 one-hour sessions aimed at 6<sup>th</sup> grade students. Approximately 2,000 students have been exposed to this program so far.

Disseminating projects that focus on fuels management also would benefit National Fire Plan goals. Idaho’s REDZONE project could be adapted to the web. It makes quick and easy wildfire risk assessments of individual structures available to both the owners and professional fire personnel. These assessments come with recommendations on how to lower wildfire risk and are also uploaded to a database that creates detailed maps to assist fire prevention and suppression.

Providing stakeholders with website based success stories and best practices could create a “one stop shop” for community fire mitigation activities with little DOI investment. Sites such as <http://www.forestsandangelands.gov/> (joint effort with DOI and USFS) and <http://www.nwcg.gov/branches/ppm/cepc/archives/wfewt/wfewt.htm> (joint effort with DOI and USFS) are not updated regularly but are capable of offering downloadable products.

During OIG site visits, local managers, staff and stakeholders frequently expressed desire for a central product repository of materials. While the specific nature of fire danger in certain areas could make adapting materials difficult, these projects still could provide models for successful educational materials.

#### **Recommendation**

4. Establish a national methodology for sharing educational and outreach products developed through WUI community assistance grants.

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# Conclusion and Recommendations

## Conclusion

Sponsoring National Fire Plan grants is a key tool used by DOI's wildland fire management programs to promote community assistance and collaboration. Federal grant monies and direct bureau involvement have helped community beneficiaries mitigate fire risks and form partnerships with state and local fire entities. Nevertheless, significant opportunities to improve the community assistance function have been overlooked because the program lacks internal DOI ownership. Such ownership could result in clarified objectives and performance measurements, development of effective monitoring tools, and improved outreach and communication.

## Recommendations

1. Assign program ownership for WUI community assistance grants and projects at the Departmental and national bureau level.
2. Strengthen the interagency NFPORS WUI community assistance module, including issuance of comprehensive guidelines for users, defined project activity elements, and performance monitoring and tracking tools.
3. Establish consistent WUI community assistance grant policies and guidance addressing program objectives and performance measures.
4. Establish a national methodology for sharing educational and outreach products developed through WUI community assistance grants.



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## **Appendix I: Scope and Methodology**

The objective of the evaluation was to determine if the Department had provided adequate guidance and oversight to help WUI communities reduce their risk from wildland fire. We conducted the evaluation in accordance with “Quality Standards for Inspections” issued by the President’s Council on Integrity and Efficiency. This review was limited to WUI communities that have received DOI grant funding and assistance. We initially narrowed the focus of the review to the 8 states receiving the most DOI WUI grant money. California and Idaho were selected for more in-depth review and a total of 20 projects were visited during fieldwork. During the course of the review, we interviewed and obtained pertinent documents from officials in OWFC, NIFC, as well as regional bureau officials from BLM, NPS, FWS, and BIA.

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