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Credit: USDA Flickr site

# PRE-SEASON PLANNING FOR WILDFIRE RESPONSE: AN ASSESSMENT OF THE U.S. FOREST SERVICE'S PODS

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Potential Operational Delineations (PODs) are an emerging approach developed to enhance safe and strategic response to wildfire. PODs are polygons whose borders align with control lines where fires are likely to be contained. They are created by expert fire managers with in-depth local knowledge of the landscape. Displayed on a map, PODs visually summarize risk and fire management options to consider when responding to an ignition. Similar to wildfires, PODs do not necessary follow jurisdictional boundaries and thus require cross-boundary planning. Efforts to develop and implement PODs have potential to align well with other agency efforts, like Shared Stewardship, to prioritize and coordinate work across jurisdictions. We have conducted interviews with 36 POD users to understand challenges and opportunities associated with this approach. Findings indicate PODs could facilitate cross-jurisdictional communication, support coordination during incident response, and may inform fuels planning.

## KEY FINDINGS

### *Communication and Transparency*

**The multi-stakeholder collaborative PODs process and tool are anticipated to aid communication about wildfire response.** We found strong evidence POD maps are useful for describing wildfire decisions to the public, politicians, and management partners. Specifically, PODs can help the U.S. Forest Service be more explicit and transparent with their decisions as PODs condense science and local knowledge into a digestible format.

Within the USFS, PODs can create a shared understanding between resource specialists as well as with forest and regional level leadership. PODs are useful for high-level staff not as familiar with fire management intricacies.

Also, with incoming incident management teams unfamiliar with the local landscape, PODs are a tool to efficiently share expert knowledge and the overarching response strategy to be employed.

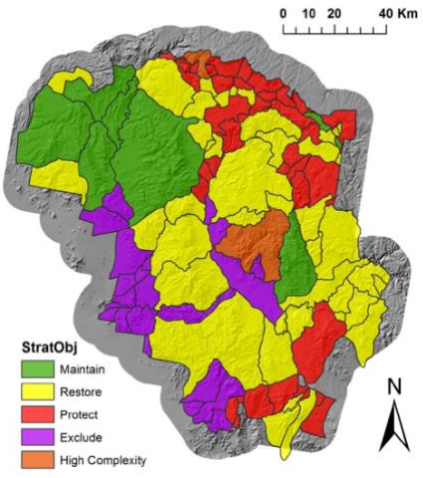


Figure 1. PODs on the Tonto National Forest, AZ. POD colors are associated with response objectives (strategic response zones). For example, red protect zones are areas near homes. (Credit: Christopher D. O' Connor)

## *Effects on Wildfire Decision Making*

**PODs facilitate informed, strategic responses when responding to unplanned ignitions**. Operationally, PODs highlight where fire and fuels staff might take different management actions given current fuel conditions.

Interviewees also said PODs support opportunities to increase the application of beneficial fire. For example, there is anticipated benefit of using PODs to explore indirect strategies when responding to an ignition.

## *Integrated Fuels Treatment Planning*

**PODs are further valuable because they offer utilization in the off season for fuels treatment planning.** PODs are anticipated to optimize fuel and vegetation treatment plans (e.g. thinning, restoration, prescribed fire) by emphasizing areas for treatment.

As part of the planning process, PODs also may promote shared stewardship initiatives because adjoining state and local partners are engaged in the development and use of PODs. Partners can share expectations and build an understanding of each agency's priorities prior to emergency situations.

Credit: Lauren Miller

## *Organizational Dynamics*

There are anticipated dynamics that influence the utility of PODs:

- Success relies on line officer leadership and decision-maker support for new approaches.
- Limited USFS staff capacity to develop and maintain PODs is a barrier to their use.
- Implementation of PODs efforts will be influenced by local social and political receptivity to USFS fire management.

**Opportunities exist for PODs to engender cross-boundary communication, transparency, and accountability in planning and wildland fire strategies.** There is room to capitalize on the full potential of PODs through stronger organizational commitment, dedication of resources, and clear leadership intent. We are working with USFS researchers[1] refining PODs to provide important perspectives about POD's utility.

## *More Information*

A full report of results is available at:

https://sites.warnercnr.colostate.edu/courtneyschultz/practitioner-papers/

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[1] Researchers include partners at the Rocky Mountain Research Station (RMRS), Oregon State University (OSU), and the Colorado Forest Restoration Institute (CFRI) at Colorado State University.

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