



Community Networks in  
Fire-Environment Resilience  
(CoNIFER)

Research Brief for Practitioner Paper  
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## INFORMING FUNDING AND RESOURCE ALLOCATION WITHIN COLORADO FOR LOCAL WILDFIRE MITIGATION CAPACITY

### INSIGHTS FROM COMMUNITY INTERVIEWS

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**We are investigating community capacity to reduce vulnerability to wildfire in Colorado. Understanding community capacity to address wildfire is important because community residents, property owners, local elected officials, and local resource managers have roles to play in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from wildfires, especially as resources are stretched thin. We conducted 11 group interviews with wildfire and forestry practitioners across Colorado to learn how capacity is translated into actions that reduce wildfire vulnerability. We utilized a [novel interview method](#) that relied on process mapping where interviewees were asked to self-assess their communities on a list of 13 capacity elements (that they could add to or adjust) and then use those to trace their influence on successful, on-the-ground projects. The list was comprised of: wealth of the community, presence of forestry/wildfire collaborative organizations, presence of contractors, percent full-time residents, acquisition of wildfire mitigation grants, Firewise USA certification, tight-knit community (people closely connected), and presence of mill facilities (or places to take mitigated woody material), fire protection districts, Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP), building codes, land-use codes, and local champions (or engaged/enthusiastic members). [Foundational work](#) highlights the dynamic nature of capacity, which we expand upon in the context of wildfire vulnerability reduction. Here, we summarize our key findings and recommendations. [Foundational work](#) highlights the dynamic nature of capacity, which we expand upon in the context of wildfire vulnerability reduction. Here, we summarize our key findings and recommendations.**

#### *Key Findings*

**Interviewees' self-assessments of local capacity vary across low, medium, and high-capacity communities.**

Interviewees assigned their communities into three categories: low, medium, and high capacity based on their self-assessments. Communities were characterized as low capacity if interviewees indicated that they lacked most elements or could use more of existing elements they possessed ( $\geq 6$  combined across these two categories;  $n=4$  communities). Communities were categorized as medium capacity if interviewees identified an equal number of elements present, available but in need of more, and lacking entirely within their community ( $n=3$  communities). High-capacity communities were those that indicated that most of the 13 elements ( $\geq 6$ ) were present ( $n=4$  communities).

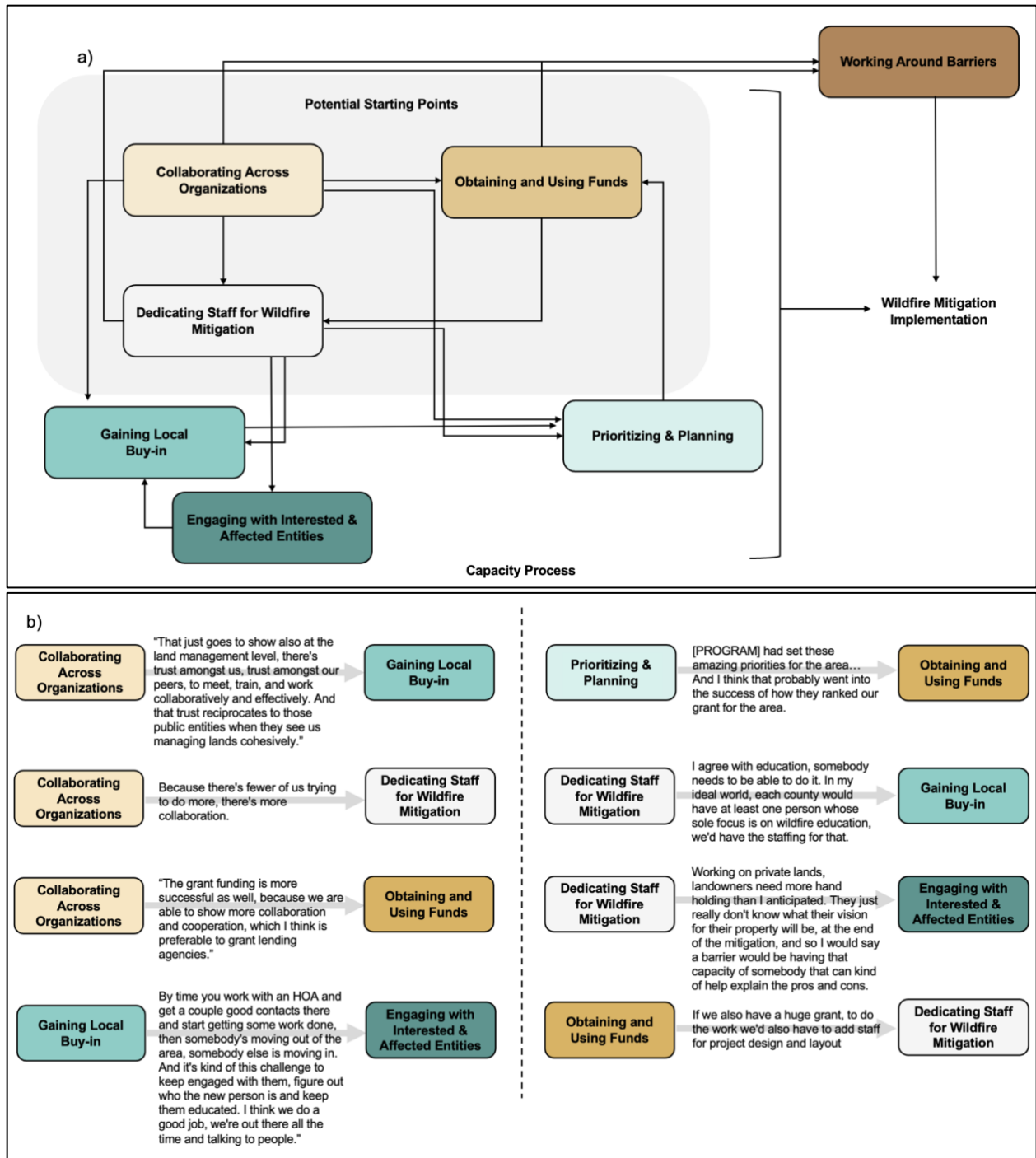
## **Seven key themes emerged regarding the process from capacity elements to project implementation.**

Themes are broad categories or patterns identified in the interview transcripts that represent overarching ideas that emerged during analysis.

- 1) *Collaborating across Organizations* highlighted the importance of working with partners and organizations across scales and expertise, as well as the benefits and challenges of working with different partners.
- 2) *Obtaining and Using Funds* showed the reliance communities have on multiple funding streams (e.g., grants, taxes), that current fiscal structures require ‘workarounds’, and that securing grants is reliant on previous grant experience.
- 3) *Prioritization and Planning* suggested that planning and prioritizing areas to treat for restoration/risk reduction is helpful in getting work done (e.g., CWPPs) but there are challenges, such as lack of staff time to do this work.
- 4) *Dedicating Staff for Wildfire Mitigation* indicated the need for more staff to engage, apply for and administer grants, and manage projects.
- 5) *Gaining Local Buy-in* indicated that encouraging buy-in via trust building takes time and that communities need to use a variety of communication and education strategies to do so.
- 6) *Engaging with Interested and Affected Entities* highlighted how engaging with different stakeholders (e.g., elected officials and politicians, contractors, landowners) requires unique and nuanced strategies.
- 7) *Working Around Barriers* showed that to overcome barriers in existing structures, communities have to come up with workarounds. Examples of barriers include caps on funding, policies restricting tree removal, and codes limiting which contractors can be hired for projects. Examples of workarounds include creating a general mitigation fund that can be used on any land type and disposing of mitigated materials in creative ways (e.g., creating dump sites, chipping, burning, landfill programs).

## **These themes are connected and relate to one another.**

Our results show ways in which interviewees made connections between themes, further exemplifying how capacity is a process in practice. The *Potential Starting Points* in panel a of Figure 1 below are themes that interviewees frequently listed as important early in the process for successful projects. The arrows between the themes indicate how interviewees described relationships between themes in contributing to wildfire mitigation implementation. Part b of the figure includes some example connections between themes with quotes from interviewees. Linking capacity to vulnerability reduction recognizes local capacity as more than what a community ‘has’ or ‘doesn’t have’, but rather positions communities as agents of their vulnerability and highlights opportunities to remove barriers to action.



**Figure 1. Local Capacity Process.** A) Relationships between capacity themes illustrate common processes through which communities move from potential initial stages or starting points (light gray box) to implementing wildfire mitigation actions, and B) Example relationships illustrated by interviewees about how the themes are linked and related.

## Recommendations

We build upon our data and draw on the expertise of local wildfire mitigation experts to provide four recommendations for policymakers and funders. These recommendations are aimed at increasing

local decision-making power and recognizing the diversity of ways that communities translate different elements of capacity into wildfire mitigation action to reduce vulnerability to wildfire:

1. **Create funding opportunities aimed at helping low-capacity communities get started:** More programs should target communities that have not previously applied for grants by lowering barriers to submission through simplified applications, not requiring matching funds, and menus of smaller-scoped projects. Programs should consider two project tiers, with one awarding seed funding for actions such as community engagement and trust building. Examples of grants that have started similar programs include the National Forest Foundation's [Collaborative Capacity Program](#), and the Colorado State Forest Service's Forest Restoration and Wildfire Risk Mitigation [Capacity Building Grants](#).
2. **Create funding sources that can support personnel time:** Funding is needed specifically for staff time and equipment. For example, funding for local fire departments that often rely on volunteers and local collaborative positions.
3. **Provide more support for strategic planning:** Planning takes time and money. Educational materials such as workshops, trainings, and training documents should be developed and facilitated to help local communities plan.
4. **Provide support resources and structures to low-capacity communities for starting programs:** Low-capacity communities often do not have help for starting programs. Having better support structures for communities with tailored resources (not top-down programming) and tools can be critical starting points. Resources might include communication and outreach materials, mapping or GIS assistance, and grant writing tips.

These recommendations are necessary but insufficient on their own to address all the issues presented. Our suggestions support existing recommendations for parties involved in wildfire mitigation, particularly those specific to capacity of wildfire and watershed collaborative groups, that could work alongside community-level institutions (for further information see Recommended Reading).

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## Recommended Reading

- [Baxter et al. 2023](#). What Does Collaborative Capacity Make Possible? Prevailing Perspectives on the Relationship between Collaborative Capacity and Landscape Stewardship Outcomes.
- [Huayhuaca et al. 2023](#). Preparing landscapes and communities to receive and recover from wildfire through collaborative readiness.
- [Sanderson et al. 2022](#). Best practices for collaborative conservation philanthropy.

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## More Information

Find out more about this project at: <https://sites.warnercnr.colostate.edu/jdsal/conifer>

For more information about this project, contact:

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Journal article to follow

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