



## CONFLICT AROUND SUPPRESSION

### DRIVERS AND LEGACIES

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Large wildfire events often have significant impacts on nearby communities. Conflict among local residents or between local residents and outside professionals tasked with managing the wildfire has been documented in a variety of studies, but relatively few studies have explored the underlying social dynamics influencing this conflict. Because conflict can undermine goals for both effective wildfire management and the facilitation of fire adapted communities that live with and quickly recover from wildfires, a better understanding of the reasons instigating conflict during large wildfires is important.

In this study, researchers interviewed 48 residents, community leaders, and professionals involved in wildfire and forest management during the 2006 Columbia Complex Fire in southeastern Washington State. The fire burned 109,402 acres of grain, pasture, and forest as well as 28 structures around Dayton, WA and was managed at different stages by teams from all three levels of the Incident Command (IC) system, with multiple state, federal, and international fire teams involved. Conflict surrounding the fires' management was covered by the media. Researchers interviewed local community members (external IC team members were not interviewed) about the roots of the conflict between local rural residents and the external Incident Command system. In particular, they sought to identify specific elements of social interaction and underlying structure that led to tensions with Incident Command teams during the wildfire, and whether the conflict persisted long-term.



## KEY FINDINGS

- Conflict stemmed from a "clash of cultures," or differences in how local residents and outside suppression teams characterized the community and believed the fire should be suppressed.
- Local residents and the IC teams did not effectively communicate regarding respective decision-making processes or the values they felt were at risk to prioritize firefighting efforts in a way that was satisfactory to local residents.
- Conflict surrounding the fire had ongoing implications including increased distrust of outside resources and more entrenched views about the right to protect private property among local residents six years after the fire.

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## RESULTS

Interviews with local residents revealed several recurrent themes around the conflict between residents and outside suppression teams during the Columbia Complex firefighting efforts. Themes addressed both reasons for the conflict during the active suppression efforts, as well as evidence and reasons for ongoing displeasure among some resident about how the fire was managed:

### Local culture of action

Local residents shared a viewpoint of self-sufficiency based around the history and culture of the community as a resource-based working landscape. Many of the rural residents that were interviewed had a long history of participating in collaborative efforts to control small wildfires in the region. These residents had the experience and expectation that suppression tactics should change quickly and fluidly, and this viewpoint clashed with the IC team's rule-oriented, top-down decision-making approach. Residents with tractors or water trucks who during past fires had helped one another by cutting fire lines or mobilized in other ways had a strong desire to assist with firefighting. Fire professionals and the IC teams, in contrast, wanted local residents to evacuate.

### Values at risk

Stakeholders that were critical of suppression efforts disagreed with how suppression resources were allocated to protect property. Local values focused on the economic and personal value of crops, timberlands, and rangelands, in addition to homes and other structures. The IC teams did not understand local priorities of protecting timberlands, rangelands, and farmlands, and focused primarily on protecting structures. Local residents said they felt that the logic behind IC team's resource allocation was never made clear to them.

### Formal rules and informal actions

Many residents felt that state and federal suppression teams took over the local fire command, and managed the fire in a different manner than the local efforts desired while restricting local assistance and efforts to help. The formal rules of the IC team governing firefighting strategy and team behavior were perceived by locals as an effort to restrict local people from contributing help and resources, while the IC team's perceived lack of aggressive action to fight the fire and their exercise of outside power over local decisions left local residents displeased with the fire's management.

### Access and property rights

Local access to many private properties was significantly reduced when IC teams arrived, and local equipment and private property owners clashed with the IC system's roadblocks and mandatory evacuation orders. Some residents wanted to help suppress the wildfire from their properties or on neighbor's properties, and were upset by roadblocks that prevented them from doing so.

### Ongoing legacy of conflict

The legacy of conflict described in interviews persisted for at least six years following the fire, when interviews were conducted. Many local residents continued to feel strongly that the fire was ineffectively managed, and they felt that neither local landowners nor the IC system had changed significantly in the intervening years. These lasting perspectives resulted in an entrenched or strengthened stance that local action and access are imperative in wildfire mitigation, and a reduced trust in future outside firefighting efforts.



## MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

Understanding root causes of conflict during wildfire or other hazard management is critical to managing future wildfires more effectively. This research shows how accepted approaches to managing wildfire risk in rural communities can come into direct conflict with the practices of larger firefighting organizations, creating ongoing social tension that persists and may be further exacerbated during future suppression efforts. It should be noted that this research is based on Conflicts between different societal structures and norms require communication around normative agreements and value systems, particularly between local residents and outside decision-making structures such as the IC system. A formal response system that does not consider local dynamics poses the risk for conflict with some populations; understanding and considering local norms, values, and practices around managing wildfire during response efforts is critical to preventing this conflict.

## MORE INFORMATION

**This brief is based on the following article:**

Paveglio, Travis B., Matthew S. Carroll, Troy E. Hall, Hannah Brenkert-Smith. 2015. 'Put the wet stuff on the hot stuff': The legacy and drivers of conflict surrounding wildfire suppression. *Journal of Rural Studies* 41:72-81. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2015.07.006>.

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