



'Put the wet stuff on the hot stuff': The legacy and drivers of conflict surrounding wildfire suppression



Travis B. Paveglio^{a,*}, Matthew S. Carroll^b, Troy E. Hall^c, Hannah Brenkert-Smith^d

^a Department of Natural Resources and Society, University of Idaho, 875 Perimeter Drive MS 1139, Moscow, ID 83844-1139, USA

^b School of the Environment, Washington State University, Heald Hall 511, Pullman, WA 99164-2812, USA

^c Department of Forest Ecosystems and Society, Oregon State University, 321 Richardson Hall, Corvallis, OR 97331, USA

^d Institute of Behavioral Science, University of Colorado Boulder, 483 UCB, Boulder, CO 80309-0483, USA

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ABSTRACT

Existing research demonstrates that wildfire events can lead to conflict among local residents and outside professionals involved in wildfire management or suppression. What has been missing in the wildfire literature is a more explicit understanding of the social dynamics that influence such conflict in rural or agricultural communities and their long-term legacy for future wildfire management. Authors conducted interviews with local residents of a southeastern Washington community in 2012 to better understand conflict surrounding management of the 2006 Columbia Complex Fire. We utilize structuration theory to demonstrate how conflict stemmed from differences in the norms characterizing the local community and the established practices of outside firefighters, the inability of these two populations to communicate in a way that established shared meanings for values at risk, and local residents' desire to contribute to suppression efforts rather than give up complete control to outside resources. The legacy of conflict during the Columbia Complex fire included increased distrust of externally based fire response and entrenched views about locals' right to protect their property. We conclude by discussing the need to account for the legacy of conflict during future wildfire events and the reasons such conflict are likely in rural or agricultural communities.

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1. Introduction

Much has been written in the last decade about the impacts of large wildfire events on human communities, particularly in the North American context. Among these cited impacts are various types of conflict among locals or between locals and hazard professionals during or following wildfire events (Brunson and Evans, 2005; McCaffrey and Kumagai, 2007). In some cases conflicts occur among groups of residents over whom to assign blame for ignition or surrounding the allocation of media attention and "helping resources" (e.g. donated food, clothing, money, etc.) in the aftermath of the event (Carroll et al., 2005; Kumagai et al., 2004; Paveglio et al., 2011). In other cases, North American conflicts over wildfire events have been rooted in long-standing battles over timber harvest and public land management in general (Hudson, 2011). Conflicts have also been noted to stem from insider–outsider

dynamics as locals are confronted with a variety of non-local players who deal with a range of issues from insurance and social services to land/resource restoration and post-fire cleanup (Cohn et al., 2008). The authors of this manuscript believe these conflicts are interesting and important in themselves, but they also contain some lessons for hazard management more broadly in and beyond the North American context.

Despite insights from a handful of studies, few wildfire research efforts in North America and elsewhere have delved deeply into the social dynamics that influence conflict among residents and firefighting forces. More specifically, existing research does not fully articulate the reasons conflict may arise among or within some communities at risk from wildfire, including the underlying reasons residents express discontent not just about firefighting efforts, but also the approaches taken to mitigate losses (Carroll et al., 2005; Taylor et al., 2007). Few studies of wildfire also consider the long-term trajectory of community perceptions following conflict over firefighting or recovery efforts (McCaffrey et al., 2013). Better understanding of such perceptions can help expand knowledge about longer-term recovery from and preparation for impacts of future

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: tpaveglio@uidaho.edu (T.B. Paveglio).

hazards (Paveglio et al., 2015a). Such understandings may also help explain how previous conflict during an event can influence future interactions agencies have with communities before and during future emergencies. This is crucial information to facilitate the goal of helping communities to become more “fire adapted,” or capable of living with, and quickly recovering from wildfire disruptions (Fire Adapted Communities Coalition, 2014; Paveglio et al., 2015a).

This article presents results from a case study conducted in southeastern Washington State in which conflict over firefighting was prominent and well publicized. The Columbia Complex fire burned the area around the community of Dayton in Garfield County in 2006. We interviewed 48 local residents and officials in the summer of 2012 to identify the social dynamics that prompted perceived resident conflict surrounding the wildfire event and to better understand whether the basis for those conflicts had changed six years after the event.

Giddens' structuration theory (1984) has been used in wildfire, hazard studies, and other contexts to help better understand how individuals act and are constrained given the institutional contexts of society (Aronoff and Gunter, 1992; Moynihan, 2012). Our efforts here extend existing wildfire research by using structuration theory to help describe and explain how conflict might arise in communities faced with or impacted by wildfire or other hazard events. Previous literature suggests that such conflicts appear to be more likely in communities with traditions of self-sufficiency in dealing with local fire events (Brenkert-Smith, 2011; Paveglio et al., 2011). It is not well understood whether this also occurs in communities that are primarily agriculturally based. Thus we suggest that the results of this case can further advance existing understanding about the need for a variety of approaches to wildfire management across diverse local contexts and provide the basis for outreach strategies that will best reduce conflicts among communities and hazard response teams (Paveglio et al., 2015b; Stidham et al., 2014). Reducing conflict includes recognition of how previous fire events, including their management, may influence resident response to future events, particularly in areas with a tradition of self-sufficiency.

2. Theory and literature

2.1. Conflict and institutions of hazard response

An established body of literature indicates that a rigidly hierarchical approach to hazard management can result in conflict between members of different organizations temporarily subsumed within the system (Moynihan, 2009; Fleming et al., 2015) and between local stakeholders and external professionals attempting to mitigate a disturbance event (Carroll et al., 2006; McCaffrey and Kumagai, 2007). The rigidity of top down approaches to hazard management has also led, in the eyes of some analysts, to notable failures during wildfires and other disturbances (Moynihan, 2009, 2012; Takeda and Helms, 2006; Weick, 1993). Examples include damages during the 2003 and 2007 fires near San Diego, California, and the highly-publicized losses during Hurricane Katrina.

Conflict among residents and between locals and outside entities is not specific to wildland fire—disaster research has long focused on the dynamics that lead to cohesion and conflict among populations brought together by such events (Cordasco et al., 2007; Perry, 2007). Literature on hazards also points to the importance of institutions, local and otherwise, in shaping how ongoing efforts to respond to or recover from disturbances play out between affected groups (Birkland and Waterman, 2008; Teeter, 2013; Tierney, 2007). Tension between institutions during hazard events can stem from a number of sources, including misunderstanding of

mitigation or recovery goals, the perceived lack of adequate information about evacuation or recovery plans, and the use of local resources in helping to mitigate ongoing damage. Each of these potential sources of conflict stems from policies, perceptions, and practices related to societal institutions at multiple scales (Ryan and Hamin, 2008; Sharp et al., 2013; Steelman and McCaffrey, 2013).

“Command and control” procedures are central to the way local, state, and federal agencies respond to fire or other hazards. In the United States, national directives such as the Incident Command (IC) system and the National Incident Management System (NIMS) historically take a hierarchical and standardized approach to mitigating wildfire situations (Bigley and Roberts, 2001; Crowe, 2010). The IC system was developed to help effectively mobilize large amounts of resources (including people) in the mitigation of and recovery from hazard events. It provides rules and tactics that dictate organizations' interaction during a hazard event and divide labor between them. Included in such regulations are structured, militaristic chains-of-command, safety protocols, and task assignment to the most qualified personnel (Buck et al., 2006; Teeter, 2013). All these measures were developed to foster a uniform approach to hazard management that enables the most effective use of professional and local knowledge in the field. However, other authors have pointed out that the top down nature of the IC system tends to ignore the tension that can occur between local organizations (e.g. firefighting organizations, local government, local civic groups) and extra-local entities mobilized to suppress fires (e.g. IC teams), the spontaneity of initial disaster response, and the roles played by volunteers (Draybeck and McEntire, 2003; Moynihan, 2009). For instance, Fleming et al. (2015) recently evaluated perceived relationship effectiveness and mission alignment among state, local and federal wildfire suppression organizations tasked with responding to events in the U.S. West. They found significant differences in perceived mission goals and firefighting philosophies across all three levels of governance and significant differences in perceived response effectiveness when federal and state or local firefighting agencies must work together. Other authors have argued that the command and control approach to disaster management does not deal well with ambiguity and turbulence often inherent in crises (Crowe, 2010).

Despite ongoing criticism of organized U.S. hazard response, it is important to point out that the IC system is a highly organized and respected institution. It is also important to bear in mind that virtually no local area has the resources to deal with large fire events on its own. In the following sections we will discuss how existing wildfire literature and structuration theory help explain the origin of these tensions.

2.2. Wildland fire, conflict, and Incident Command teams

Hazard events can cause conflict among social groups brought together during and following the event. For instance, multiple authors have observed how disconnects between residents' and managers' perceptions of wildfire risk, mitigation, and (to a lesser extent) recovery often lead to conflicting actions (Aravi et al., 2006; Olsen and Shindler, 2010). Such conflicts can actually reduce the effectiveness of programs designed to prevent or mitigate impacts from wildfire (Kumagai et al., 2004; Tierney, 2007).

Conflict between residents and professionals during wildfire events often stems from residents' perception that Incident Command teams (IC teams), through adherence to standardized rules and procedures for fighting wildfires, fail to meet their expectations for management, including the protection of property, quick return home after evacuation, or timely and accurate information about firefighting efforts (Carroll et al., 2006). Subsequent blaming

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