

Promoting Fire Adapted Communities through Property Assessments: Data & Tools

Within both qualitative and quantitative assessment programs, there is a wide range of potentially pertinent data and a broad spectrum of ways to access and use those data.

Existing data

The identification of existing data is a key step in the development of an assessment program. Regional and/or statewide assessments are available for many areas, and can offer landscape- or community-level insights to planning. For example, many regions have programs that pool existing data to generate information on wildfire intensity, equipment accessibility and more. In many cases, these data are made available through online portals, such as the Southern Wildfire Risk Assessment Portal (SouthWRAP) and others (see Resources section on back). Other local and regional sources, including appraisal data, may also be useful for assessment programs.



An inspector evaluates fire hazards during a property assessment in the Tahoe Basin.
Photo by Tahoe Douglas Fire Protection District

Assessment data

Although the nature of assessment data can vary, most programs focus on the same central themes: landscaping features

Key points

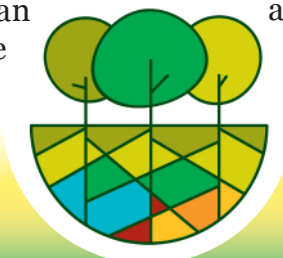
- Identify existing datasets that may be useful for planning. Regional and/or statewide assessments are available for many regions.
- Assessment tools are evolving rapidly, and there are exciting opportunities to use new technologies for property assessments.
- Even in light of technological advancements, qualitative, in-person assessments remain a pivotal element of many successful programs throughout the country.

and vegetation; structural issues and building materials; access for fire engines and other equipment; availability of on-site resources like water; and surrounding forest, landscape and community features.

Tools

Assessment tools continue to diversify and improve, following innovative trends in technology. The age of handheld devices has opened new doors for data collection, as have open-source platforms for data storage and maintenance. In Boulder County, Colorado, for example, fire professionals use an app developed in-house to collect assessment data and upload them directly to a database. In some places, these real-time data are made available to the public through online platforms that allow property owners to review and edit information. In Klamath County, Oregon, homeowners can use the “Assess My Risk” link on the county’s Ready, Set, Go! website to view and edit assessment data for their properties. Those data were collected through quick roadside assessments, and are organized and maintained through a private company that specializes in these types of adaptive, user-friendly databases.

These technological advances can greatly enhance the scope and capacity of



assessment programs, but they have not rendered in-person meetings or standard assessment forms any less relevant; many of the most robust assessment programs still rely on face-to-face interactions between fire professionals and homeowners. For example, the assessment program in Austin, Texas is woven into quantitative resources like the Texas Wildfire Risk Assessment Portal, yet leaders attribute the program's success to its more qualitative elements, including a train-the-trainer program that enables in-person communications and builds relationships between fire professionals and homeowners. This emphasis on qualitative, in-person assessments is echoed in the Tahoe Basin, where their programs depend on face-to-face interactions that build trust and streamline efforts to reduce wildfire risk.

Cost

The costs of assessment programs can vary substantially, depending on staffing needs and costs of data collection and storage. The more qualitative programs rely heavily on staff and/or contractor time for in-person meetings with homeowners, and for data collection and entry. In areas with a mixed approach, those staffing costs are compounded by costs of technology consultants and complex database management.

For example, the program in Boulder County involves seven part-time consultants and two county staff, as well as supervisory staff time to oversee the program. A consulting firm was hired to advise the county on the development of the tablet-based app, which staff use to conduct assessments. In Klamath County, a grant provided funds for initial roadside assessments, but data are organized and managed by an outside contractor that charges annual fees, thereby requiring more consistent funding to ensure program success into the future.

In summary

Again, in weighing these different approaches, it's important to revisit the needs of your community. If there is a need for landscape-scale data that helps identify priority areas for treatment, a quantitative approach may be warranted. This approach requires high technological capacity, which can be met through in-house staffing or via contractor and may involve significant costs. If, on the other hand, there is more need for property-level hazard mitigation and homeowner education, a qualitative approach may make more sense. This tends to be true in places where priority areas have already been identified, and homeowner action is the goal. These programs are staff intensive, and may require parallel training programs to cultivate qualified personnel (see QG 2.2, Training).

Resources

Southern Wildfire Risk Assessment Portal (SouthWRAP) www.southernwildfirerisk.com

Texas Wildfire Risk Assessment Portal (TxWRAP) www.texaswildfirerisk.com

Klamath County Ready, Set, Go www.kcrsg.org

Boulder County Wildfire Assessment Program www.wildfirepartners.org

For more information about the Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network, visit the website at <http://www.facnetwork.org> or email info@facnetwork.org.

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The Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network is supported by Promoting Ecosystem Resilience and Fire Adapted Communities Together, a cooperative agreement between The Nature Conservancy, USDA Forest Service and agencies of the Department of the Interior through a subaward to the Watershed Research and Training Center.

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