

Developing Community Connections with Asset Mapping

SITUATION ASSESSMENT

Situation assessment is Step 1 in an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) process that helps people connect their strengths to create new opportunities for living well where periodic wildland fires are expected. (See the Series Overview for an introduction to the whole process.) Situation assessment is a good place to start if you do not already have partners in the area where you will be working. It allows you to learn directly from community members about their strengths and challenges. It also gives you a way to identify people who enjoy meaningful community involvement and who are natural collaborators. Once you have people to work with, you will be ready for Step 2 in asset-based community engagement: asset mapping with community “connectors.”

What is Situation Assessment?

Situation assessment prepares for successful collaboration. It requires in-person interviews of people who are active in or concerned about fire affecting their community. By listening to their stories, you learn about their knowledge, experience, interest and relationships related to fire—and realize how these strengths have contributed to community good. You can also learn where agreement and disagreement take place, and why.

The situation assessment method presented here differs from situation assessments that agencies use to prepare for a formal collaborative process to decide about, for example, relicensing a dam or re-introducing wolves to public lands. In those cases, agencies contract with a neutral person to conduct their situation assessment. This encourages stakeholders to speak more freely than they would if talking to the representative of an agency that is itself invested in the outcome of the decision.

In this guide, we combine situation assessment techniques with an asset-based approach to help you develop community contacts for fire adaptation action planning that starts with and builds on community capacities. Through a succession of relaxed interviews with open-ended questions about the experience of fire as an event involving the entire community, asset-focused situation assessment can help you:

- ▶ Meet people and find new partners;
- ▶ Find organizations, businesses and key events that express values you share; and
- ▶ Understand a community’s strengths and limitations.

Compiling and Sharing the Results

Your situation assessment is complete once you have a sense of the level of experience and interest in fire adaptation among various individuals, groups and organizations in the community. You don’t need to have “all the information.” Just review your opportunities to proceed collaboratively in relation to the community assets you have uncovered so far. Put your own agenda or program aside for the moment. What did you learn about community strengths, differences, barriers to fire adaptation, and opportunities for fire-adaptive actions? Who would you like to work with?

Prepare to share the results by typing up a directory of all the assets you found, in three categories: individuals, groups and organizations. Don’t worry about it being incomplete—getting locally knowledgeable people together to fill in gaps in your directory is a great kick-off for the next step: asset-mapping. As they do that, they will start to see how connecting and mobilizing these assets creates new perspectives and opportunities. This is one way in which they can begin to own the development of their fire adapted community.

The next installment in this series, “Asset Mapping with Connectors,” outlines how to work with a community’s assets—individuals, groups and organizations—to facilitate steps toward community-led fire adaptation action planning.

Community × Good Assets Relationships → Creative ACTION

As you interview people, you may find local “connectors” who are ready to innovate asset-based community action. These are the people who might think to bring together the high school football team and a homeowners’ association to pile brush along the road for a chipper day, or introduce a local goat farmer to some neighbors who hire her to graze down dry grasses near their houses. Maybe some of them will start buying her goat cheese at the farmer’s market! A strong indication of a fire adapted community is fire management capacity integrated into the local economy.

Situation Assessment:

Step 1 in the Asset-Based Development Process for Helping Communities Adapt to Fire

While there are no firm rules for how to engage in successful situation assessment, we have found these general guidelines to be helpful:



Define the task but be flexible.

Set a geographic boundary, a period of a few months, and a target number of interviews. Plan time before and after interviews to explore the area and chat with store owners, restaurant waitstaff, librarians, artists and others about their experience of fire.



Use the “snowball” method.

Start with just a couple of key contacts instead of a complete list. End each interview by asking who else you should talk to.



Welcome different types of fire-related experience and interest.

Look for and welcome diverse opinions and expertise. You may learn as much from a rancher, a school administrator and a bicycle race promoter as from a battalion commander and a forest health activist.



Consider where to meet, for how long.

Expect to spend about an hour per interview, so meet someplace comfortable. Conference rooms are likely to emphasize professional position while restaurants offer a more social feel.



Ask questions, don't discuss.

Focus on understanding your interviewee without adding your own commentary. Ask clarifying questions, but do not correct any misconceptions about fire at this point. Instead, learn about why and how they came to their present understanding.



Take notes.

Hand-written notes tend to seem less intrusive than a recording app. Just note down the story outlines and the assets mentioned—any individuals, groups or organizations that are described positively. Stop taking notes if a story becomes personal.



Start as you mean to continue.

Focus on the positive (asking questions about assets and not getting bogged down by problems), send thank-you notes, and keep personal information confidential to set up good working relationships for the future.

This is part of a series of guides that will familiarize FAC practitioners with the hows and whys of the community-led asset mapping process. Together they lay out some best practices and lessons learned by communities as they use this process to become better adapted to fire.

Read the overview of the process: bit.ly/ABCD_Overview

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The Fire Learning Network and Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network are part of *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. For more information about PERFACT, contact Lynn Decker: ldecker@tnc.org or (801) 320-0524.

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