

# Researchers outline policy approaches to transform fire management

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'Successfully transforming fire management requires people working together across jurisdictions, and a commitment to long-term goals,' said Courtney Schultz, associate professor of forest and natural resource policy at Colorado State University. Credit: Bill Cotton/Colorado State University

Wildfires are natural hazards that are becoming more intense and

extensive with climate change. Scientists have previously described what major transformations should take place to contend with these fires, including the need to adapt to more fire on the landscape, change the way communities are designed, allow for more prescribed fire and thin fuels like brush and smaller trees.

"How do we design governance and policy approaches to get us to where we need to go?" asked Courtney Schultz, associate professor of forest and [natural resource policy](#) in the Warner College of Natural Resources at Colorado State University.

She answers that question, in part, in "Collaborations and capacities to transform fire management," published online by the journal *Science* on Oct. 3. Schultz teamed up on the study with Cassandra Moseley, research professor in the Institute for a Sustainable Environment at the University of Oregon.

"Successfully transforming fire management requires people working together across jurisdictions, and a commitment to long-term goals," said Schultz, who serves as the director of the Public Lands Policy Group at CSU. "It means people have to live with fire and smoke now, when the easier and, sometimes, the safer choice is to put fires out, and to not light fire. In governance terms, it requires a lot of collaboration and collective action. Community leaders and land managers need long-term vision and commitment."

Moseley said that organizing human resource capacity, interagency agreements and planning in advance are critical to ensuring that prescribed fire and other work can happen in the right place at the right time. "Sometimes conditions for a prescribed burn in one place may be good, but you may have firefighters off in another area battling a fire or doing other work," she said.

Through their research, the scientists found a number of innovative and collaborative projects across different levels in several states. Schultz said the paper recommends policy approaches that can expedite these types of collaboration.

## **Innovative approaches across the West**

One example of collaboration in fire management is the Rio Grande Water Fund in Northern New Mexico. The project, originally launched by The Nature Conservancy, brings together new funding sources and diverse partners to reduce fire hazard and protect water supplies.

Partners on this project include the Greater Santa Fe Fireshed Coalition, which has been working to get more prescribed fire done in the forest. Other organizations have found creative ways to build capacity, like bringing in young people from underrepresented communities to teach them skills in fire management.

Colorado also has some active collaborations that provide road maps for others.

Land managers on the San Juan National Forest have been conducting larger prescribed burns over the last several years, thanks to leadership commitment and collaboration with partners like The Nature Conservancy, Chama Peak Land Alliance and the Mountain Studies Institute.

"U.S. Forest Service personnel are committed to getting prescribed fire on the ground on the San Juan, and they work actively with many partners to make it happen," said Schultz.

In addition, California has some noteworthy projects. In the Sierra National Forest, the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration

Program brought together former litigants, environmental groups, tribes and industry to pursue strategies to support more forest restoration work.

California also has a statewide Fire MOU Partnership to advance the use of prescribed fire. In recent years, the governor organized a fire management task force, which recommended doubling the amount of prescribed fire in the state.

"State-level leadership has really made a difference in a lot of places," said Schultz. "California approved using money from the revenue they get from their carbon market to support fuels reduction teams, and they are creating teams that can do mechanical thinning in forests and prescribed fire across the state. The California Air Resources Board is also a major partner in those efforts."

Schultz said that [fire management](#) is not a "one size fits all" proposition because landscapes and climates vary so much, from state to state.

"Everyone involved has to figure out what's going to work, and what's needed, from the city to the state to the federal level," she said. And that is why Schultz and Moseley have underscored that collaboration and capacity-building are the keys to finding a path forward for living with fire.

"It's great to see our work on governance contribute to the conversation," she added. "There's research in the social and political sciences to inform how we think about these issues, and there's also a recognition that [fire](#), like other climate-driven disturbances, has become a tremendous challenge in the U.S. and around the world. This will be a critical area for governance research going forward."

**More information:** C.A. Schultz at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, CO et al., "Collaborations and capacities to transform fire

management," *Science* (2019). [science.sciencemag.org/cgi/doi/...  
1126/science.aay3727](https://science.sciencemag.org/cgi/doi/10.1126/science.aay3727)

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