

Wildfire Plan Alignment

Mariposa County

OVERVIEW

REGION

*Western Sierra Nevada
Foothills*

POPULATION

17,420

TOOL TYPES

*Community Wildfire
Protection Plan, Master
Plan*

LEAD AGENCIES

*Planning Department, Fire
Department*

CLIMATE IMPACT AREA

Wildfire Resilience

SUMMARY

Mariposa County has historically experienced a general pattern of fires that have occurred frequently, referred to as the natural fire regime. In many areas of the County, however, the natural fire regime has been significantly altered by human activities and forest health impacts, such as drought-induced insect outbreaks and tree mortality. These alterations have resulted in larger and more severe fires in recent years, including the Rim Fire (2013), Detwiler Fire (2017), Ferguson Fire (2018), and River Fire (2021), and have caused impacts ranging from fatalities, structure losses, post-fire rockslides, evacuations, national park closures, lost tourism revenues, and more.

In response, Mariposa County has prioritized wildfire resilience and collaborative partnerships throughout its planning activities. This includes the adoption of an updated countywide Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP), which serves as the overarching document to guide wildfire planning and resilience activities, and two master plans, which integrate wildfire planning and adaptation into wider community building initiatives: Mariposa Creek Parkway Master Plan and the Mariposa County Recreation and Resiliency Master Plan. These plans are also aligned with other county plans, including the General Plan and Local Hazard Mitigation Plan (LHMP).

This case study was selected as a Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) Planning Best Practice because it shows how different plans at local and countywide scales can incorporate wildfire resilience through topics such as land use planning, Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), fire adaptation, parks and recreation planning, and forest health. This case study also offers an example of how the county aligns multiple plans to reinforce a holistic approach to wildfire mitigation and preparedness. Finally, this case study illustrates the importance of stakeholder collaboration as a key component in the development and ongoing implementation of wildfire resilience planning activities across the County.

Plan alignment involves leveraging connections, information, and resources to build shared language, data foundations, and processes across multiple planning efforts. The resulting deliverables are a suite of two or more plans that share data, aligned visions, and complementary goals, strategies, and actions. Plan alignment helps communities integrate planning teams, data, and processes to achieve more effective solutions and outcomes. Plan alignment means broadening planning approaches and coordination to be more collaborative.

TOOL DESIGN

The updated Mariposa County Community Wildfire Protection Plan was adopted by the Mariposa County Board of Supervisors in February 2021. This plan was a comprehensive update to the previous CWPP (2012) and included many new topics and features, such as a countywide assessment of wildfire hazard and risk, a delineation of the wildland-urban interface, and an action plan for implementation and tracking.

The CWPP acts as an umbrella document for compiling, guiding, and coordinating wildfire risk and mitigation activities across the County. These activities encompass a range of actions that target

Front Image: Jonah Susskind

resilient landscapes, fire-adapted communities, and response and suppression capabilities. The County uses the CWPP as its leading wildfire planning document to establish countywide priorities and coordinate wildfire activities that are also established in other plans, including the Mariposa Creek Parkway Master Plan and the Mariposa County Recreation and Resiliency Master Plan.

The Mariposa Creek Parkway Master Plan, adopted in January 2020 by the Mariposa County Local Transportation Commission, guides the implementation of improvements and enhancements to the Mariposa Creek Parkway to serve as a recreational and civic amenity for residents and tourists. The plan establishes a vision for an interconnected regional trail system while meeting a range of environmental objectives for restoration and resilience. Although pre-dating the recent CWPP update, the parkway master plan includes content on wildfires from the previous CWPP and incorporates strategies such as prescribed fire that achieve multiple objectives for wildfire risk reduction and resilience, habitat

restoration, and increased public awareness of the environment.

The Mariposa County Recreation and Resiliency Master Plan, adopted by the Mariposa County Board of Supervisors in March 2021, further leverages opportunities to link resilience with park lands and open space, recreation and activities, trails and connectivity, and natural systems. This plan analyzes how resilience can be increased to improve the natural environment, built environment, human health, and social equity across the County. Wildfire resilience is integrated throughout the plan and has dedicated sections that discuss linkages to the updated CWPP and other applicable plans (e.g., Local Hazard Mitigation Plan), site planning considerations for wildfire, and best management practices.

All three plans play important roles in addressing wildfire to influence outcomes at community and landscape scales. Cross-references and shared content among the plans, such as wildfire history, data, and trends, are also important to coordinate priorities and provide consistent messaging on wildfire to plan users.



Conceptual proposal for a section of the Mariposa Creek Parkway Master Plan. Image: WRT

CWPPs must meet three minimum requirements as established by the Healthy Forests and Restoration Act (2003). These requirements are:

- 1. Identifying and prioritizing areas for hazardous fuel treatments*
- 2. Recommending measures for reducing structural ignitability*
- 3. Ensuring the plan was collaboratively developed by local and state government representatives, in consultation with federal agencies and other interested parties.*

Local government agencies and state entities responsible for forest management must also agree to the final CWPP.

for the CWPP, including the Mariposa County Fire Safe Council, Planning Department, Fire Department, and Resource Conservation District. The Planning Department also served as the lead agency to develop and implement the Mariposa Creek Parkway Master Plan and the Mariposa County Recreation and Resiliency Master Plan.

While each plan varies in how it gets implemented, the CWPP Implementation Chapter has an action plan with a list of actions, corresponding priority (high, medium, low), proposed leads and timeframes, and resources required for implementation. The action plan is designed to be flexible and updated often and can fold in wildfire-related actions from other plans for tracking and coordination. In addition, the CWPP risk assessment mapping process created community profiles that show local risk factors for each community and corresponding individual action plan templates for identifying customized risk reduction actions. This also enables communities' ability to track change in risk metrics and supporting projects as a decision support tool.

Mariposa County Fire Advisory Committee membership includes representatives from:

- CAL FIRE*
- Mariposa County Fire Department*
- Mariposa County Fire Safe Council*
- Mariposa County Resource Conservation District*
- Mariposa County Planning Department*
- Mariposa County Public Works Department*
- American Indian Council of Mariposa County*
- Yosemite National Park*
- Pacific Gas and Electric*
- Mariposa County Sheriff*
- Sierra and Stanislaus National Forests*
- Bureau of Land Management*
- SouthWest Interface Team*
- University of California Cooperative Extension*
- Sierra Telephone*
- Up to five members of the public*

IMPLEMENTATION

More than half of the total land area in Mariposa County is managed by state and federal land management agencies, including the National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, US Forest Service. This broadens the scope of partnerships and working agreements required to plan and implement wildfire mitigation activities across the County and reinforces the need for collaborative planning.

To address this need, the Mariposa County Board of Supervisors established the Mariposa County Fire Advisory Committee (MCFAC) in 2019 by a County resolution. MCFAC is a multi-stakeholder working group that is tasked with considering and making recommendations on topics including pre-fire coordination, fire prevention education, fire risk reduction and resource resiliency to the County Fire Chief and Board of Supervisors. MCFAC is required to meet quarterly, and the County's planning department plays a designated role in facilitating the committee's meetings and activities.

Several members of MCFAC served as the leads

COLLABORATION & ENGAGEMENT

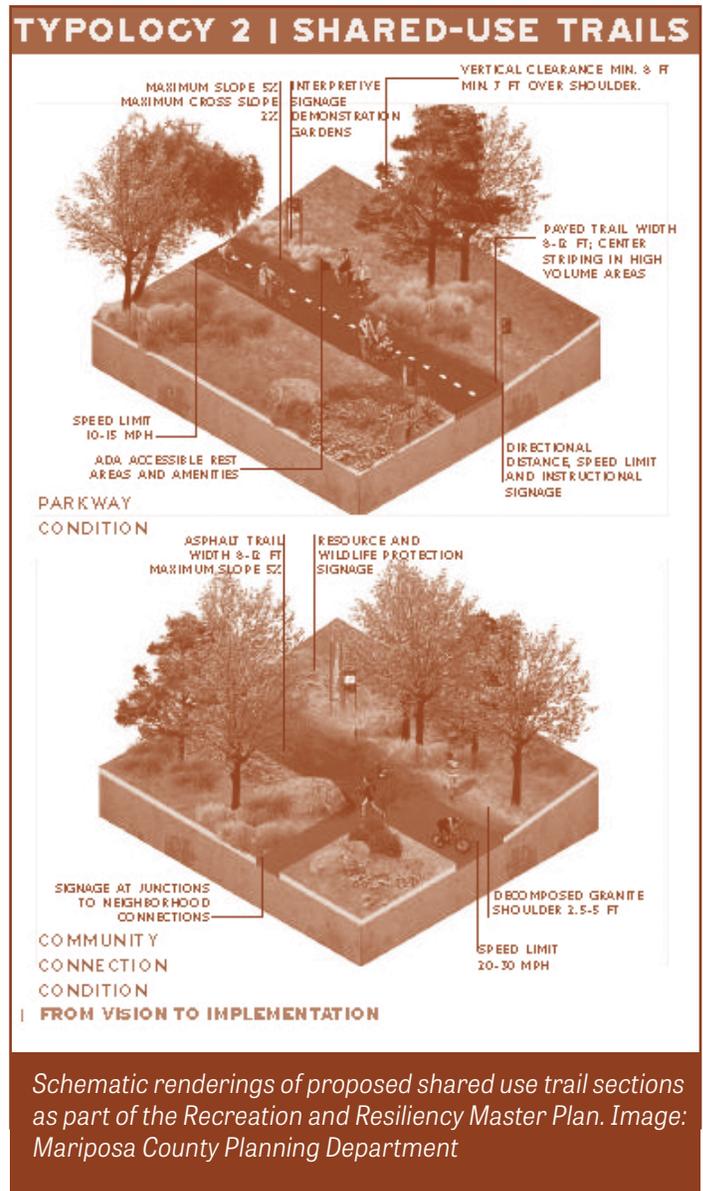
The planning process is inherently designed to be collaborative. To qualify for funding under the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, CWPPs also have a legislative requirement to ensure that collaboration occurs. Several of the County's recent planning efforts, however, were undertaken during the pandemic—the CWPP and Recreation and Resiliency Master Plan were both being initiated in early 2020. This created unique challenges for public engagement, collaboration, and outreach. Both processes accommodated the virtual environment to find creative ways to engage stakeholders and the public.

The Recreation and Resiliency Master Plan conducted a series of online community forums to gather input on the project prioritization process. During the forum, the planning team used a [detailed story map](#) to help guide the discussion and planning process. The story board also served as an educational tool for anyone engaged in learning more about the plan during its development. The CWPP also held virtual public workshops and presented draft versions to MCFAC to receive feedback on the wildfire hazard and risk.

INNOVATIONS

In addition to several features mentioned previously, the Mariposa County CWPP takes a unique approach by aligning with the three core tenets of the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy: resilient landscape, fire-adapted communities, and improved response. This approach creates a comprehensive and holistic framework for addressing wildfire across the County. This also creates an effective umbrella for other plans to plug into at various scales.

For example, the Mariposa County Recreation and Resiliency Master Plan integrates wildfire planning considerations into priority projects.



While this is a countywide scale, these projects are initiated within local priority areas. Project objectives align with countywide goals established in the overarching CWPP. Projects such as trail expansions should consider how trails can support fuel management objectives, such as the development of strategic fuel breaks and fire suppression access; upgraded park facilities, such as campgrounds or picnic areas, should also create and maintain defensible space and appropriate access to sites for effective fire management and response activities. The plan received a Planning and Analysis Award by the American Society of Landscape Architects in 2021 to recognize the plan for its clear goals and strategies that enabled planners to achieve the

co-benefits of resiliency with recreation planning.

The Mariposa Creek Parkway Master Plan also integrated TEK into one of its priority projects, which is to address the removal of invasive species, especially the Himalayan Blackberry and Tree of Heaven. Rather than exclusively relying on potentially harmful pesticides, the invasive species removal program employs TEK to treat invasive species and prime the Creek corridor for revegetation with native species. Through a partnership led by the American Indian Council of Mariposa County, project leaders will use both conventional fire prescriptions and traditional practices which Indigenous land managers have implemented for centuries to manage the foothills landscape. Not only are these methods proven to be successful, but they are also a significant part of the region's heritage and identity, making the prescribed burn program a unique opportunity for creative placemaking and storytelling. TEK and prescribed fire are also priority activities carried forward in the countywide CWPP.



Crews participate in the prescribed burn of a debris pile in Mariposa County, in partnership with the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation. Image: Mariposa Planning Department

FUNDING SOURCE

Funding for plan development and implementation varied based on each plan. The CWPP was primarily funded by a California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) grant as part of the California Climate Investments Program, and the County Board of Supervisors also committed additional County funds. The Mariposa County Recreation and Resiliency Plan was funded by transferring \$150,000 from a settlement fund (established by the County following a settlement with the Merced Irrigation District) for development of the plan. Implementation of both plans will rely on additional grant funding.

Funding to develop initial conceptual and enhancement plans for the Mariposa Creek Parkway was provided by regional planning assistance funds from the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans). Shortly after the master plan was adopted, the California Natural Resources Agency awarded nearly \$800,000 to the Mariposa County Planning Department and the Sierra Foothill Conservancy to fund the acquisition of the property needed to extend the Mariposa Creek Parkway. This strategic acquisition was a priority implementation action and an essential step in realizing the community's vision for this transformational project. Additionally, the project has received \$460,000 from the California Wildlife Conservation Board to implement restoration activities in the acquired parcels, and \$4.4M from Caltrans to construct the Parkway in this key portion of the riparian landscape.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

REPLICABILITY

Key insights from Mariposa County can help other communities consider wildfire resiliency as part of their planning process, including:

1. *Aligning the timing and momentum of related plans can make it easier to link*

current information, data, and priorities. In this case study, all three of the County's planning efforts took place within 18 months of one another. The Planning Department also acted as central agency to coordinate stakeholders, consultants, plan timelines, public outreach, and deliverables.

2. Planning for wildfire resilience can take many forms, as illustrated by the projects and priorities in these three County plans. For example, wildfire resilience can be integrated into trail planning, the built environment and fire-adapted communities, TEK, prescribed burning practices, and more.
3. Incorporating tangible metrics and tracking mechanisms allows for easier jumping-off points for taking the next steps in plan implementation.

RESPONDING TO DATA, STATE REGULATIONS, & CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTS

According to the [Sierra Nevada Regional Report](#) of the 4th California Climate Change Assessment, wildfire activity is expected to increase in frequency and intensity in many parts of the Sierra Nevada Region, including Mariposa County. The region may also experience a growth of large fires, or fires over 24,700 acres. This is particularly damaging to ecosystems, as large fires can contribute to conditions which delay or prevent forest recovery. Some contributions

to this projected increase in size, frequency, and intensity of fires, are a result of potential reductions in annual snowpack, as well as drought-related forest-mortality events. The report acknowledges the role that indigenous communities can play in utilizing fire as a tool for managing ecosystem health.

The holistic approach that Mariposa County is utilizing integrates topics such as land use planning, TEK, fire adaptation, parks and recreation planning, that will build resilience to wildfire impacts, while improving forest and ecosystem health. This is essential as the Regional Report emphasizes that increased fire activity in the region will impact human development, and the capacity of the region to respond and recover to wildfire events. Further the report states that, "all communities but especially tourism-dependent communities suffer when active fire, smoke, and ash close facilities during the high season, constraining a critical economic sector."

FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information about Mariposa County's current planning priorities, including the [Recreation and Resilience Plan](#) and the [Creek Parkway Plan](#), please visit the County Planning Department's [Current Project webpage](#). For information regarding the County's CWPP or the Mariposa County Fire Advisory Committee, please visit the [Fire Department's webpage](#).

This case study is part of a series of Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) Planning Best Practices. Each case study focuses on a specific planning tool (or set of tools) that a community is utilizing to reduce risk and build resilience to wildfire across the state of California. This project is part of [California Climate Investments](#), a statewide initiative that puts billions of Cap-and-Trade dollars to work reducing greenhouse gas emissions, strengthening the economy, and improving public health and the environment – particularly in disadvantaged communities.

