

# **FireWatch: A Citizen's Guide to Wildfire Suppression Monitoring**

## ***Part Three: A Guide to Agency-Community Communication and Collaboration in Wildfire Management***



*by*

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Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, & Ecology  
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[www.fusee.org](http://www.fusee.org)

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**ABOUT FIREFIGHTERS UNITED FOR SAFETY, ETHICS, and ECOLOGY (FUSEE):** FUSEE (pronounced FEW-zee) is a national nonprofit organization founded in 2004 that conducts public education and policy advocacy to promote safe, ethical, ecological fire management. FUSEE members include current and former wildland firefighters, fire management managers and scientists, fire educators and students, forest conservationists, rural homeowners and other interested citizens.

Inspired by the great Aldo Leopold's "Land Ethic," FUSEE promotes a new Fire Ethic in fire management policies and practices:

*"A thing is right when it contributes to the safety of firefighters and the public, ethical public service and use of taxpayer dollars, environmental protection of fire-affected landscapes, and ecological restoration of fire-dependent ecosystems. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."*

FUSEE informs, inspires and empowers firefighters and their citizen supporters to become torchbearers for the new paradigm of Ecological Fire Management.

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# INTRODUCTION TO THE FIREWATCH GUIDES

Along with an upsurge in wildfire activity across the U.S. has been a rapid escalation in risks to firefighters, costs to taxpayers, and environmental impacts on public lands from fire suppression activities. The climate crisis, suburban sprawl, and excess fuel loads resulting from past fire exclusion have all changed the fire environment in ways that make conventional suppression tools and techniques developed in the 20th century less effective in the 21st century. The aggressive suppression responses of managers attempting to avoid the short-term risk of escaped fires is externalizing greater risks to future generations of firefighters who, under the effects of climate change, will likely face wildfires burning under more severe fire weather conditions. But America has long since passed the point of diminishing returns: spending more and more money and resources on fire suppression is resulting in less effective protection of homes and communities from wildfire damage while fire-dependent ecosystems further decline.

The mounting risks, costs, and impacts of suppression actions are, paradoxically, a result of society's misguided combative relationship with wildland fire. The dominance of fire management by suppression, and its militaristic framing as fire fighting, accounts for much of the problem. Wildfire suppression operations on public lands are official "states of emergency" that are developed without prior environmental analysis or informed public involvement, and decisions to aggressively suppress nearly all wildfires no matter their location, conditions, or effects often run afoul of the best available fire ecology science and commonsense economic rationality. Most citizens are on the sidelines during wildfire incidents, and what little they learn about suppression actions they get from the news media, which, too often, uncritically relays the official spin of agency spokespersons. Consequently, firefighting actions often escape critical analysis or external oversight, leading to a systemic lack of agency transparency and accountability. That must change.

## **Wildland firefighters need your support**

Wildland firefighters always seek to optimize their "situational awareness." This applies to citizen watchdogs, as well. When citizens learn how to gain access to unmediated sources of wildfire suppression information and documents, critically analyze the data, and communicate their concerns to agency officials, they can become assets in helping fire managers make better decisions in wildfire responses. Wildland firefighters and the public they serve stand to benefit from increased public understanding and involvement in wildfire management, and improved agency transparency and accountability of suppression operations on public lands.

Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics and Ecology (FUSEE) offers *FireWatch: A Citizen's Guide to Wildfire Suppression Monitoring* to help environmental reporters, forest conservation groups, taxpayer watchdogs, and other concerned citizens learn how to monitor wildfire events and suppression operations occurring on public lands. The FireWatch Guide will provide people with step-by-step instructions and advice needed to access agency documents and analyze data on suppression operations.

The FireWatch Guide is divided into three parts. Part One details how to access information from government websites during wildfires in order to learn where they are located, where they might be heading, and what kinds of suppression resources have been dispatched to manage the fires. Reporters and local citizens can access these information sources on their own in real-time, and thus avoid being dependent on agency spokespersons which often involves delays between when events are happening and the time that news releases are issued.



*The best way for citizens to support wildland firefighters is to help avoid sending them into harm's way when alternatives to aggressive suppression are available.*

Parts Two and Three of the FireWatch Guide are combined in this document. Part Two explains how to access suppression operation documents after a wildfire. In most cases, these documents will require a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request, so tips on how to navigate the FOIA process are also provided. Part Three provides tips for citizens and groups to share their findings with fellow community members, and how to share their concerns with agency officials during, after, and especially *before* a fire. Together, the FireWatch Guides will help empower people to become citizen “Fire Watchers” that monitor wildfire suppression incidents, providing vital citizen input and public oversight to the agencies in ways that will help wildland firefighters be able to do their jobs more safely, ethically, and ecologically.

# FireWatch Guide Part Three:

## A Guide to Agency-Community Communication and Collaboration in Wildfire Management

Being a FireWatcher who monitors suppression operations is an essential first step in raising consciousness about the risks, costs, and impacts of “fighting” fires. You may be working alone or on behalf of an organization. If you are a member of some organization, that gives your views some added weight, but do not doubt the power of a lone voice raising “inconvenient truths” to inspire others to advocate for progressive policy change. Being part of a local organization may also offer the opportunity for year-round engagement and collaboration with the individuals and agencies that manage fires in and around your community.

Of course, Part 2 of the Firewatch Guide is all set to occur after the fire has concluded. If you are part of a local organization, like a Tribe, FireSafe Council, or timber company, you should be involved year-round, particularly during the run-up to fire season, and to the greatest extent possible, during the fire itself. Some of the documents you might seek through the FOIA process after a fire can be more readily obtained while the fire is occurring, particularly if your group has field-going liaisons or a regular attendee of stakeholder briefings occurring daily at the Incident Command Post (a.k.a. “Fire Camp”). Part 3 of the FireWatch Guide will help you navigate the pre-season and ongoing incident to the point of becoming a partner in some incident decision making. Once you have acquired and analyzed the documents you need, it is time to share your concerns, criticisms, or compliments with your community, agency and elected officials, and the news media.

In our experience, just a handful of citizens calling the right people at the right time with the right information has successfully prevented some highly destructive suppression actions from being implemented. You can be successful, too, when you are informed and empowered to share your views (both criticisms and compliments) of wildfire suppression operations with your fellow citizens! Here are some ideas and tips to consider:

### Communicating With Your Community

The first people to talk about the information you have been gathering is your family, friends, neighbors, and fellow members of organizations you belong to. You will probably find that they will be very interested in hearing about the actions you have documented, but may not agree with you, at first, that there is any problem with the firefighting actions. Decades of Smokey Bear propaganda have caused most people to fear nearly all forest fires, and the militaristic culture imbued in firefighting makes most people feel the strong need to “support the troops” in the field. However, bear in mind that we are not supporting firefighters when they are unnecessarily sent into harm’s way for no good reason--especially when alternative strategies or tactics that would limit their exposure to risk and hazards were not fully considered--or when taxpayer dollars are wasted on knowingly futile suppression actions, or when firefighters are ordered to do environmentally destructive actions that leave impacts far outweighing the effects of the wildfire alone. On the contrary, wildland firefighters depend on citizens like you to give them real support through vocally promoting safe, cost-efficient, ecologically-sound fire management on public lands!

After talking with the people in your community you already know, you should contact other folks who might share your values and concerns about proper fire management on public lands. A good place to begin is talking to other organized community groups. A great starting point is with Native American tribes. Both federally-recognized and non-recognized tribes generally have well-established collaborative engagements with the federal agencies surrounding and often managing their aboriginal lands. Local FireSafe Councils (FSCs) are another good place to look for existing groups focused on wildland fire issues. If there isn’t one in your community, think about starting one. An FSC could be a committee or an outgrowth of a homeowner’s association. All of these examples, thus far, imply local land ownership which increases your standing in dialogue with the agencies managing fires because you have a direct stake in the fire outcome. Other organizations could include forest conservation organizations, watershed councils, or other citizen groups with a local geographic focus. Even more generally, you might engage with hunters and fishers, hiking and mountain biking clubs, commercial boaters, wild plant harvesters, school

groups, or businesses that cater to outdoor recreationists. Use your imagination to contact and network with other community groups who also care about proper management of public lands and could be adversely impacted by inappropriate suppression actions.

## Before the Fire

The most important thing to cultivate and curate in collaboration with firefighting agencies, like the state and federal government, are sincere and genuine long-lasting human relationships. As in nature, the more interwoven and inclusive systems prove most resilient. Sadly, within these agencies there is a revolving door of individuals including decisionmakers, specialists, and other functionaries. It can be frustrating for local communities with stable, known individuals constantly having to retrain a new face, when the last District Ranger retires or takes a promotion, or when the fuels specialist that had worked for years on a complex fuel treatment project moves on. Be patient and build a community of interest, such that it can stand independently and weather the revolving door of new players coming and going, as they move on in their careers.

### People to call to voice urgent concerns about wildfire operations include:

- The Regional Forester and his/her deputies: According to the Forest Service's own regulations, the Regional Forester has the authority to approve the use of mechanical equipment, such as chainsaws and bulldozers, inside designated wilderness areas, and have considerable power within the bureaucracy.
- The Forest Supervisor or Park Superintendent and his/her deputies: Forest Supervisors and Superintendents sign the "delegations of authority" that provide the objectives and list of do's and don'ts for Incident Management Teams to apply in fire management actions.
- The District Ranger: District Rangers do not normally have a hands-on role in supervising larger suppression operations, but they are the final authority on smaller fires and can be very influential with Forest Supervisors. If you can persuade Rangers to do or not do something, this may work up the chain of command and reach the hands of actual decision makers.

You can simply call up the local office of the relevant land management agency, and ask switchboard operators who are the people, phone numbers, and email addresses of the types of officials and managers listed above. Also, attend any community meetings convened by the agency to introduce yourself and establish relationships with agency employees. However, employee contact information is also available on the Internet.

### Other important people, with whom communication during wildfires is critical:

- **The Fire Management Officer or his/her assistant:** Fire Management Officers may have little hands-on authority on large wildfires that are managed by Incident Management Teams from outside the Forest or Region, but on initial attack of smaller fires they will be the ones making most of the decisions.
- **The Public Affairs Officer or Fire Information Officer:** The Public Affairs or Fire Information Officers do not have any decision-making power, but do provide a conduit for information. This is usually one-way, sending information out from the agency to the public. Citizens can try to work with these public relations professionals to reverse that direction and get messages to the people making decisions.
- **The Incident Commander and members of his/her team:** The Incident Commander (IC) and Incident Management Team (IMT) are the people devising firefighter shift plans and making decisions on a day-to-day basis on large wildfires. These folks will be the most difficult to reach because they will be located in fire camps which are usually off-limits to the public, they use unlisted, temporary phones, and they rotate off of wildfires every 14 days. So citizen monitors must track who is on a given fire and the duration of their assignments. Every new rotation of IMTs you might have to reestablish relationships and communications with the new team.

The local Fire Management Officer, often called the Unit Chief, working on behalf of the local tribe, park, forest, wildlife refuge, or in the case of the state wildland firefighting organization, private lands, will convene preseason collaborative meetings, usually in the late winter and spring. These meetings are intended for all interested landowners and the groups representing them (timber companies, FSCs, etc.) In addition, other supporting agencies like State Police, County Sheriffs, utility providers, and so on, are usually in attendance. At these preseason meetings, a weather expert will often be invited or seasonal assessments may be shared that indicate the expected length and severity of the upcoming fire season. By springtime, final snowpack measurements are usually in, and the most recent El Nino/La Nina forecasts are developed, and all that is shared with the group. The firefighting agencies will usually share information on expected staffing for the season, local problem areas and locations for proposed fuel treatments.

FireSafe Councils may announce changes to or completion of a Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) or other risk assessment. This document may or may not exist for your community, but they have been mandated in some states for communities in fire-prone areas. In most situations the local Fire Safe Council curates that document, which receives county-level approval and spells out community routes of evacuation, proposed fuel treatments, and is the result of a community-wide collaborative effort. Working within a FSC is the best way to get involved in community-level fire planning. Building codes, county ordinances, seeking the community Firewise USA site certification, ensuring reverse 911 coverage – these are all within the scope of work for a FSC.

Sometimes a preseason fire stakeholder meeting might be centered around a fire simulation. This gives all stakeholders an opportunity to identify those values they believe need protection and is the same process an IMT goes through with stakeholders on an actual wildfire. During the simulation, fire managers will explain their decision-making process, agency administrators can explain their land management objectives, and other specialists can present information, for instance T&E species in the fire area, retardant avoidance areas, and nearby water sources that may or may not be suitable for helicopter buckets. Sometimes the simulation may go through the process of developing a Wildland Fire Decision Support System (WFDSS) decision document. On even the largest fires, there will only be a handful of WFDSS decision documents generated, and the document represents the agency administrator's incident management direction to the IMT. Having all the stakeholders present, as the objectives and requirements are developed, can often help everyone understand how competing values are handled when the decision space and time is limited.

## **During the Fire**

When a wildfire does occur, an IMT will be assigned to manage the fire. That IMT may be from the local area, or they may be from elsewhere. Either way, the Incident Commander (IC) leads the IMT to manage the fire on behalf of the host agency (jurisdiction where the fire starts) agency administrator (District Ranger, Forest Supervisor, Park Superintendent, etc. – see inset). A larger IMT will have a dedicated Fire Information Officer (FIO) and possibly a large staff to maintain “trap lines” (the dozens of informational sandwich boards around the fire in public places used to post maps and other information), write press releases, host visits by the press, scan and post to social media, and conduct public meetings. On smaller fires with a small IMT the FIO duties may be carried out by a local staff member, for instance a Forest Public Affairs Officer (PAO).

In cases where communities are threatened by wildland fire and/or smoke, fire management agencies typically start convening community meetings to deliver information. These public meetings offer a great opportunity for you to gather information and establish relationships with the agency officials and employees you need to communicate with, but also to inform and educate your neighbors and fellow citizens who attend those meetings. Community groups, if present, usually assist the FIO or PAO assigned to set-up meetings, by finding suitable sites and helping to get the word out. You might try distributing flyers containing some key points you've learned from reviewing websites (see Part 1 of the FireWatch Guide) or analyzing documents (see Part 2 of the FireWatch Guide), but at a minimum, you should use public question and answer sessions to raise your concerns and ask questions of agency officials in ways that help educate others. Attend as many of these meetings as you can, and make yourself known as an informed citizen.

On large fires, especially during periods of rapid growth, the IMT Liaison Officer and/or public information team



will host daily morning stakeholder meetings, usually soon after the morning shift briefing for crews. These daily updates are for all cooperators and stakeholders, including the various layers of law enforcement, timber industry representatives, Tribal liaisons, utility providers, transportation representatives, FireSafe Councils, and so on. Ensure your organization has a representative at this meeting. Individual members of the public do not have access to these stakeholder meetings, only known group representatives.

Another idea for establishing regular communications between citizen monitors and the agency include signing up to receive daily press releases and information updates sent out via email by the Fire Information Officer or Public Affairs Officer.



*Community wildfire liaisons should strive to attend morning briefings along with the newmedia at the Incident Command Post.*

All of these information sources for ongoing fires will only yield the official agency line, as vetted by the IC to his or her FIO. To be where the decisions are actually made in real time requires you being imbedded in the incident organization. Tribes have been doing this for some time, by entering into an agreement with the firefighting agencies to provide tribal liaisons and Tribal cultural resource advisors during incidents. These individuals are paid by signing up as administratively-determined (AD) temporary employees. Tribal resource advisors (READs) work with the primary incident READ, who is designated by the host agency administrator, to mitigate impacts from ongoing suppression impacts like dozer and handline construction. Other READs assigned to the fire may be specialists in wilderness, fisheries, wildlife, and so on, but all their concerns flow through the lead READ to both the IC and agency administrator.

A tribal liaison, as opposed to a READ, may go out to the fire at times, but is primarily engaged at daily planning meetings to voice any problems seen in the proposed strategy from day-to-day.

Finally, wildfire monitors can agree to serve as a volunteer community liaison to help the agency get information out to a broader group of citizens and community groups. Like a Tribal liaison, this arrangement requires a formal written agreement with the land management agency that must be hammered out and signed in the off-season. IMTs have a dedicated position, called the Liaison Officer, that work with all the stakeholder and cooperator liaisons. Working in this capacity, you are able to attend all the important functions at the ICP or fire camp, which are otherwise closed to the general public. Only those able to attend morning incident briefings where the IMTs give the day's shift plans to the supervisors of fire crews, or more importantly the much smaller planning meetings that occur prior to the printing of the next shift Incident Action Plan (IAP), can really engage the IMT to alter strategy or tactics before they happen. Grandstanding and long-windedness are not tolerated in these meetings, while brevity and a bias for solutions will be rewarded. This is the crucible where trusting relationships are forged. Like the revolving door of new faces in land management agency positions, IMTs from distant states don't have the long-standing personal relationships forged through the community liaison interaction on many fires over the years. In the example below, all the IMTs in Northern California are now familiar with the Community Liaison program and are accustomed to the personalities and their presence on the fire. The same cannot be said for IMTs coming from afar, which is why it is so important that the local agency administrator promote the program, as teams arrive to help manage the fire.

## Community Wildfire Liaison: A Model

Wildfire suppression monitoring implies waiting for an ignition to begin (Part 1 explained how to monitor operations with online government information sources) or an incident to end (Part 2 explained how to monitor operations with a FOIA request for suppression documents). But the best way to be a FireWatcher is through direct communication and interaction in real-time with the people managing the wildfire. Performing the role of a Community Liaison to IMTs, a position that was pioneered by the Salmon River Fire Safe Council in rural Northern California, is probably the best means of both communicating your concerns to the agency, and sharing information you get from the agency with your community.

The Salmon River Restoration Council (SRRC) has created a Community Liaison Program with the Forest Service that has successfully demonstrated the benefit of citizens gaining access to Fire Camp to attend incident briefings and meet with staff when and where key suppression decisions are being made in-the-moment. The strong relationship nurtured by the SRRC with their local Forest Service staff during the off-season (i.e. well before wildfire smoke is in the air!) has led to their Community Liaison position becoming mandated through formal pre-season agreements with a Memoranda of Understanding (MOU). The MOU specifies who the community liaison will be (it may be a pool of people that rotate) in the Letter of Delegation to the IMT. It further specifies that the Community Liaison be present at the initial IMT in-brief, all successive IMT transitions, as well as all day-to-day planning meetings.

Community Liaisons offer much value to by providing input to IMTs on local community knowledge of the area and their values-at-risk, and by sharing information they get from IMTs with their local community. Some community members trust information coming from their neighbors more than from the newsmedia or government spokespersons, and can be a critical counterweight to rumors and misinformation that can spread fast via social media during a wildfire. Community liaisons are particularly valuable in planning evacuations, if those become necessary. It would make good policy to formally establish the Community Liaisons position within the Incident Command System (ICS) along with the host of other resource advisors that provide input to IMTs.

Community Liaisons are able to attend IMT briefings and planning meetings, and get copies of ICS-209s, IAPs, maps, and other relevant documents with a simple, friendly request to the right person at the ICP. Accordingly, they can access this information long before they might become available through a conventional FOIA request process, and more importantly, can use this information to potentially influence suppression operations as a recognized representative of the local community. This is what matters most, and should be the ultimate goal of FireWatchers: to help ensure safe suppression operations that protect people and property while also upholding the values of ethical public service and ecological protection.

### **Finding Forest Service employee contact info on the Internet:**

You can find the regular listed phone numbers and email addresses of all Forest Service employees on the agency's website ([www.fs.fed.us](http://www.fs.fed.us)) by clicking on the "Employee Search" button and using that search engine. That requires you to know the specific names of the people you want to contact. Although it may be difficult to get through the gatekeepers of a Regional Forester's or Forest Supervisor's switchboard operator, with persistence a citizen may eventually be able to speak directly with one of the Forest Service employees. Ultimately, whomever in the agency you are able to contact and establish regular communications with, any messages you wish to send must wind up in the hands of the IC and IMT to affect on-the-ground operations.

### **Finding Department of Interior employee contact info on the Internet:**

It takes a little more work to access employee Internet search engines for the agencies within the Department of Interior. First, go to the DOI's homepage: (<http://www.doi.gov>) click on "Bureaus and Offices," click on the headers for individual agencies, and then look for employee directories. For example, for the Bureau of Land Management, click on the BLM header, then click on "Information," click on "Directory," then, input the name of the employee you seek. Other agencies within the DOI (e.g. National Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service) will require different procedures.

## Conclusion

No fire manager wants an uninformed citizen looking over their shoulder, second-guessing their decisions, acting like a “Monday morning quarterback.” But they are public servants managing public lands, and there must be greater transparency and accountability for their decisions and actions they make with taxpayer dollars on public lands. There is a role for well-informed citizens to provide constructive criticism about the overall objectives, strategic, and tactical choices that managers make on wildfires. And citizens should offer heartfelt praise, too, when managers make good decisions that achieve safe, ethical, ecological fire management goals. Citizens have knowledge of real places and local values-at-risk that can help managers prioritize their protection and restoration efforts when developing daily Incident Action Plans. Some agency officials or individual managers may not appreciate your unsolicited advice at first, but do not let that keep you from assuming a rightful civic role as a member of the public voicing your opinions to improve management of your public lands. In time, perhaps, agency employees may come to see citizen FireWatchers less as critics and more as assets—even partners—in ensuring appropriate management responses to wildfires.



*Citizen monitoring can help ensure that suppression crews and resources are concentrated on protecting communities while managing backcountry fires for ecological benefits.*

Citizen monitoring of wildfire operations is a brand new field for conservation activism, and it may make agency officials and other employees nervous, at first, since the agencies are used to planning wildfire suppression operations in a “black box” with little to no public oversight or citizen input. The first obligation and highest priority of agency officials will be to manage the wildfire with firefighter and public safety as their highest concern. If you are perceived to be obstructing their efforts you may find yourself cut off from further communications. So think creatively about different ways you can gain information and establish relationships for two-way communications between yourself and the agency. And remember, don't be afraid to be assertive in pressing your democratic rights to know about government operations, but it is best to treat agency employees with respect and kindness—you are trying to become their partner in facilitating two-way communications between the agency and the community. You will be more successful in getting information and being heard if you approach wildfire monitoring in this collaborative spirit.

Every time wildland firefighters are ordered to aggressively “fight” a wildfire, it puts their health and safety at risk, costs taxpayers lots of money, and inflicts significant impacts on natural resources and ecosystems. Ground-level firefighters deserve all the thanks and praise they receive from appreciative citizens for the difficult and dangerous work they do. But an uninformed, uninvolved public that is blindly supportive of all suppression actions conducted in its name does not provide the best support for firefighters.

Wildfire operations need to get out of traditional insular decision-making processes that exclude the public and press from information they have a right to know, and that ignores citizen voices that have a right to be heard. Greater transparency and improved accountability in wildfire suppression operations will help make the case for changing policies and practices to promote ecological fire management. This is the kind of public support ground-level firefighters deserve and need, and this is the spirit and goal of becoming a FireWatcher.