



Forest Service  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

WILDFIRE CRISIS  
strategy

# CENTRAL WASHINGTON INITIATIVE

## WILDFIRE CRISIS STRATEGY INVESTMENT LANDSCAPE

Reducing wildfire risk on the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest

Updated: Aug. 8, 2023

The Central Washington Initiative (CWI) was among the first ten landscapes identified for investment under the national Wildfire Crisis Strategy.

The CWI landscape is comprised of 3,116,000 acres, approximately two-thirds of which are located on the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest, and one-third on other federal, state, tribal, private, lands in Chelan, Okanogan, Kittitas and Yakima counties, and includes the North Central Washington Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Project (CFLRP). It contains six high-risk firesheds and four of the state's top ten communities most at-risk of wildfire exposure: Leavenworth, Wenatchee, Chelan, and Cashmere. The area is also closely aligned with areas identified as high-priority for fuels reduction and wildfire risk reduction in the Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR) 20-Year Forest Health Strategic Plan.

In 2022, the Regional Forester signed a memorandum of understanding with Washington Department of Natural Resources to partner in planning and implementation of wildfire risk reduction treatments within the CWI.

Over the next ten years, state and federal managers plan to treat 25,000 acres per year on National Forest System lands, and 10,000 additional acres on other federal, state, tribal and private lands annually, resulting in 350,000 acres of treatments



Smoke rises from the White River and Irving Peak fires August 22, 2022. The lightning-caused fires burned 15 miles northwest of Plain, WA, along the west edge of the Central Washington Initiative investment landscape area. The recently-signed Upper Wenatchee Pilot Project will reduce hazardous fuels and protect residents of Chelan County, WA USDA Forest Service photo.

to reduce fuels and wildfire risk in central Washington and additional planning to ensure long-term maintenance in the treated areas.

### WHERE WE ARE

In fiscal years 2022 and 2023, the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest worked to obligate \$48 million in federal funding towards planned projects. Forest leadership will continue to pursue funding towards an estimated \$220 million in planned projects through fiscal year 2027. During CWI's first two years as a designated landscape, Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest leadership have focused on building capacity by scaling up its

workforce and conducting strategic planning needed to support long-term success.

The forest has nearly completed recruitment for a 14-person planning and implementation team, and is now working to fill six new 10-person fuels crews.

Recruitment for firefighters to fill the 60 newly-created fuels crew positions, particularly the seasonal positions, has been slower than desired, which is reflective of hiring and staffing challenges being faced nationally. Forest staff are also exploring alternative methods, such as contracts or agreements with partners, to create some of the capacity needed to expand the forest's fuels work.

### Early successes

- *The Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest has developed Master Agreements with the Confederated Tribes of the Colville and the Yakama Nation to increase tribal capacity for cultural resource review on projects, conduct traditional cultural property studies, and to establish a tribal liaison for coordination on CWI projects. The forest also initiated a \$2.5 million Tribal Forest Protection Act (TFPA) project on the Naches Ranger District with the Yakima Nation, and additional TFPA proposals have been received or are in development.*
- *The Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest has successfully scaled up its use of prescribed fire, completing 4400 acres of prescribed burning in fiscal year 2022 and 6400 acres to date (through August) in fiscal year 2023, with a goal of treating 7500 acres with fire by September 30.*
- *The forest nearly doubled the number of contracts and agreements supporting fuels and wildfire risk reduction work in one year, from 16 contracts and 6 agreements in fiscal 2022, the initiative's first year, to 23 contracts and 18 agreements in 2023. These contracts and agreements reflect more than \$15 million obligated in fiscal 2022, and an \$25 million in local support to forest health projects in 2023. These investments support work that reduces risk to communities and forest lands while contributing directly to local economic development.*

## WHERE WE'RE GOING

The projects funded to date represent considerable progress in addressing a multi-year backlog of previously planned work on the CWI landscape.

Using fiscal year 2022 funding, the forest has contracted fuels reduction and thinning on 6,000 acres of forest and is funding an additional 2000 acres of work through its Good Neighbor Authority agreement with Washington Department of Natural Resources. The forest will use an air curtain incinerator to convert some of the biomass (vegetation and small woody material) produced by thinning projects into biochar, a high-carbon soil amendment. This process releases less carbon dioxide and particulate matter than pile burning.

The forest is obligating fiscal year 2023 funds to contract for up to 40,600 additional acres of thinning and prescribed fire treatments over 20,100 acres of forest land, and to fund up to 10 additional aquatic restoration and roads projects. The forest has utilized contracting and agreements with partners for planning support (NEPA or landscape evaluations) for 4 forest health and fuel break projects, and to complete stand exams, cultural surveys, and botany surveys to support future projects.

The forest is working closely with with the conservation community and forest products industry, through agreements with Sustainable Northwest and the Washington Resource Development Council to support public and partner engagement, including collaboratives.



Engagement with a broad coalition of partners and the public is the key to success in large, landscape-scale forest health and risk reduction projects. Above, USFS employees and partners involved in discuss work on the Central Washington Initiative landscape with U.S. Sen. Patty Murray (WA) during an August 2023 visit. USDA Forest Service photo.