

# COMMUNITY MITIGATION ASSISTANCE TEAMS: A PROVEN APPROACH

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Members of a community mitigation assistance team on assignment near the Bridger-Teton National Forest in the Jackson, WY, area. Photo: USDA Forest Service, Community Mitigation Assistance Team.

Communities in the wildland-urban interface (WUI) have challenges that other communities don't. They struggle to establish and maintain a viable wildfire mitigation effort over time. While many communities understand their risk and want to reduce it, they don't have the local capacity to accomplish it for lack of funds or staffing or because it places more burden on community volunteers. Then, when

The community mitigation assistance team is a national resource aimed at helping communities and agency units impacted by wildfire.

a wildfire strikes, the community struggles to stay ahead of it in terms of last-minute risk reduction, communication with residents, and stress related to an incident.

The national Community Mitigation Assistance Team (CMAT) concept was developed to offer assistance to targeted communities to address these issues by first helping to build local capacity during the off season in anticipation of an event and then

by helping communities cope with wildfire on the landscape by using it as a motivation for risk reduction at the community level.

The CMAT is a strike team of WUI mitigation professionals with extensive experience in effective methods of working with communities, forming partnerships, and getting risk reduction work done on the ground. Sponsored by the Forest Service, it is designed to

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help communities build sustainable local capacity for wildfire mitigation during high-risk times before, during, or after a wildfire, when awareness of the need for risk reduction and the likelihood of action is highest. The team applies community fire adaptation best practices and resilient landscape concepts outlined in the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy.

The CMAT concept was field tested in 2015 during the Chelan Complex Fire in Washington, when the team worked closely with the communities of Leavenworth and Wenatchee, the Chumstick Coalition, the county fire departments, residents, city governments, and Washington Fire Adapted Communities Coalition to address mitigation challenges, teach best management practices, and strengthen an existing coalition. The field testing established the value of deploying a highly proficient WUI mitigation team to collaborate with local communities and Forest Service units during the teachable moments before, during, and after a wildfire.

## The team helps communities build sustainable local capacity for wildfire mitigation before, during, and after a fire.

Team deployments in 2016 further demonstrated the viability and timing of the CMAT concept, showing acceptance of the need by local communities and Forest Service units. The teams showed a positive return on investment in terms of capacity building, mitigation on the ground over time, coalition building, dissemination of best practices for effective mitigation, reduction of risk to civilians and firefighters, and good will between partners (table 1).

In 2017, CMAT got the thumbs-up to become a national resource aimed at helping communities and agency units impacted by wildfire. Though a Forest Service project, CMAT has

strong, deliberate, cross-boundary interagency partner engagement and awareness and is available to all interagency partners.

The CMAT concept is based on:

- Fire social science showing that residents are more likely to mitigate when they perceive the risk to be high;
- Experience that many communities are frustrated by mitigation measures that don't work and are hungry for best practices;
- Requests from communities for a helping hand to move their mitigation efforts forward;
- The inability of local resources to meet those needs during a teachable moment;
- The understanding that use of best practices at an opportune time yields a good return on investment; and
- Recognition that local capacity is the biggest barrier to mitigation.

CMAT members are partners from Federal, State, and local governments; fire departments; and

**Table 1** — *Benefits from community mitigation assistance teams (CMATs) before, during, and after a wildfire.*

CMATs can:	Before a fire	During a fire	After a fire
Help communities, the Forest Service, and other agencies build effective and sustainable cross-boundary wildfire risk reduction partnerships	X		X
Help existing partnerships identify and move past risk reduction barriers	X	X	X
Help communities and agencies move away from mitigation practices that don't work	X	X	X
Teach best mitigation practices that result in risk reduction on the ground	X	X	X
Work collaboratively with communities, incident management teams, and agency units to provide mitigation support and guidance to communities during an incident		X	
Serve as mitigation-focused liaisons and subject matter experts between incident management teams/agencies and fire-impacted communities		X	
Provide followup mentoring for partnership members to help develop mitigation plans, analyze challenges, define outcomes, and build capacity	X		X

nongovernmental organizations. They are chosen based on their knowledge, expertise, and training in *effective* community fire adaptation concepts and practices. Teams may number two to eight people (including trainees), depending on community need; assignments have been for 11 to 14 days (including travel). There is no cost to communities, agency units, and incident management teams that meet the enabling conditions, but participating communities and units are expected to collaborate with the CMAT while it is onsite, act on the team's recommendations resulting from the assignment, and respond to followup tracking of resulting accomplishments.

Communities requesting a CMAT *other than when* an incident is actually occurring should:

- Be at medium to high risk of wildfire;
- Already be working across boundaries with partners to reduce community wildfire risk;
- Have an identified mitigation challenge that warrants CMAT assistance;
- Be available for the team to imbed and be ready to work collaboratively with the team onsite;
- Be able to provide a workspace and support for the team; and
- Commit to implementing recommendations resulting from team assistance.



*A community mitigation assistance team working with the Teton Area Wildfire Protection Coalition. Photo: USDA Forest Service, Community Mitigation Assistance Team.*

## The team applies community fire adaptation best practices and resilient landscape concepts.

Communities, agency units, and incident management teams requesting a CMAT *during a wildfire* should have the ability to work collaboratively with the team to meet just-in-time mitigation challenges as a result of the ongoing incident.

CMATs are available to help communities and agency units

year-round and during ongoing wildfire incidents. All requests are vetted for enabling conditions, likelihood of success, and return on investment. To request a CMAT, contact Pam Leschak, National WUI/Fire Adaptation Program Manager, 208-387-5612 or [pleschak@fs.fed](mailto:pleschak@fs.fed). ■