

HERDING CATS: GRASSROOTS AND CENTRALIZED ORGANIZING IN THE
CASE OF CALIFORNIA'S FIRE SAFE COUNCILS

By

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ABSTRACT

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The wildland urban interface (WUI) is the zone where private development and public lands meet. The WUI has been growing drastically in the western United States, and losses from wildfires in this zone have been increasing as well. Federal land management agencies have the authority and capacity to act on public lands, but are challenged in addressing wildfire threats to bordering private lands. Community-based collaborative groups are a recognized model for utilizing local knowledge and incorporating community input to produce results in challenging natural resource management issues on both public and private lands. Fire safe councils in California are collaborative, community-based organizations that work to increase community awareness and preparedness for wildfire threats. Fire safe councils exist at multiple scales from the grassroots community group to countywide organization to the state-level California Fire Safe Council. Fire safe councils have just begun to be studied and the relationships among the councils not been addressed. This thesis explores grassroots, centralized, and networked models of organizational structure using the case of California's fire safe councils as an application of community-based wildfire management. This study employed multiple qualitative research methods: participant observation, document analysis, interviews and interview coding and analysis. The varied

responses paint a picture of a diverse grassroots movement and highlight the tensions that arise when a centralized organization comes onto the scene to organize for the same mission at the state level. Strengths and weaknesses for each model of organizing were analyzed as they applied to the case study of fire safe councils in California. Results highlight reasons grassroots groups are successful at the community-level and centralized organizations may struggle, as well as strengths that a centralized authority can bring and reasons to consider a networked structure.

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INTRODUCTION

As growth and development spread further into the wildland urban interface (WUI) in the western United States, the line between private developed communities and public wildlands is becoming blurred and expanding. Wildfire threats to property and people in this zone have increased. Federal land management agencies operate to reduce wildfire losses on largely federal public lands, but do not have the capacity or authority to operate on private lands. In rural areas and the WUI, professional fire services are limited. These areas are largely served by volunteer fire departments called upon for emergency response and fire suppression. Community-based volunteer collaborative groups operating as fire safe councils have shown great potential to improve community wildfire safety, awareness and preparedness. In recognition of the potential of community groups to address private lands and public education in the WUI, there has been an emphasis placed on community fire safety activities in the National Fire Plan and Healthy Forest Restoration Act, with funding priorities established for collaborative community groups. Several models of community response in the WUI have emerged, most having a top-down hierarchical structure of coming from a centralized organization or agency to educate and assist homeowners.

California has the largest and fastest growing WUI. This thesis analyzes the case of fire safe councils as the most widespread model of community preparedness in California and explores its organizational structure. At the time of my field research, there were over 150 active fire safe councils in California, ranging from small

neighborhood groups to countywide organizations and a state level council. These groups were varied in their organizational structure, funding, and activities. What they had in common was their voluntary basis and interest in reducing wildfire in their communities.

This research explored concepts from organizational theory relating to the strengths and weaknesses of two different organization types: decentralized, locally-based, grassroots organizations and centralized, hierarchical, and typically more bureaucratic organizations. I analyzed the strengths and weaknesses of these organization types found in organizational theory literature as they pertain to the unique situation of fire safe councils in California. An alternative to these two models is presented, based on analyzing literature on networked governance and loosely coupled systems. I then applied qualitative analysis, using the lens of organizational theory to focus on the diversity of voices found across the state's fire safe councils, and to explore their relationship with the centralized California Fire Safe Council.

The following chapters will include a discussion of the literature on community-based collaboration, community-based fire management, and organization theory as a basis for analyzing fire safe councils in California. An analytical framework of strengths and weaknesses of organizational strategies is applied to the case of fire safe councils in California to offer insights into some of the tensions that have come up around their organization structure, and potential suggestions for organizational strategies looking ahead.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years much attention has been paid to growing development and increased losses from wildfires in the “wildland urban interface.” The wildland urban interface (WUI) is defined as “the line, area, or zone where structures and other human development meet or intermingle with undeveloped wildland or vegetative fuels (National Fire Plan 2000).” This zone has been growing rapidly in recent years as human development adjacent to public lands and within wildlands has been increasing (Field and Jenson 2005). Housing growth in the WUI was rapid during the 1990s with California having the highest number of houses in the WUI (Stewart et al. 2006), and losses from wildfires in the WUI had been steadily increasing as well (Poizner and Grijalva 2007). The role of professional fire services often ends in rural areas and volunteer fire departments perform response and suppression activities only. In contrast, wildfire preparedness involves factors that people can influence to reduce fire magnitude, severity, and human vulnerability.

Federal land management agencies are responsible for and can organize preparedness activities such as fuels reduction on federal wildlands, but in the WUI there are many individual, unorganized private land and homeowners who make decisions about their personal level of fire preparedness. No single entity is in charge. Public education is critical for both preparedness and emergency response and evacuation, and state and local government agencies that might be responsible are overtaxed with the

challenge. Community volunteers on the other hand have diverse backgrounds and skills to contribute to their communities to aid in these efforts.

Collaborative, community-based approaches to natural resource management and planning have been increasing in the western United States (Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000; Brick et al. 2001; Cortner and Moote 1999; Weber 2003). These efforts came out of the intractable gridlock of “top-down” natural resource management, where centralized “experts” relied on science to make decisions, only seeking public participation in minimal ways (McKinney and Harmon 2004). Community-based collaboratives, collaborative conservation, community-based ecosystem management, and grassroots organizing are all different ways of naming this movement. It seeks to address resource management problems through place-based, decentralized authority and processes that involve collaboration with public and private entities, incorporating local knowledge and experience and tying in outside expertise to reach management decisions to create more stable and connected communities and ecosystems with resilient ecological function (Weber 2003).

Philip Brick, Donald Snow and Sarah Van De Wetering (2001:2) noted,

“Although no single strategy, process, or institutional arrangement characterizes this movement, collaborative conservation emphasizes the importance of local participation, sustainable natural and human communities, inclusion of disempowered voices, and voluntary consent and compliance rather than enforcement by legal and regulatory coercion.”

Community-based collaboration has been described as “citizens taking the reins” in managing natural resources (McKinney and Harmon 2004: 180). McKinney and

Harmon (2004) described the core of this strategy as devolution, decentralizing decision-making authority and questioning the validity of science-based management. They found collaborative, community-based management approaches to be unique in their focus on place, and in the extent of citizen initiation and organization. They wrote, “if we are losing faith in the ability of government agencies to arbitrate among competing interests, we are gaining a renewed confidence in our own ability as citizens and leaders to work together to shape and implement public policy” (181).

Collaborative partnerships involved in natural resource management have been increasing in western states over the past decade and a half (McKinney and Harmon 2004). Most participants and proponents of collaboration cite the failure of traditional decision-making processes as the main reason for the rise of the collaboration movement (Coughlin et al. 1999, Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000). Disputes over environmental protection and land management in the past have been adversarial, instigating lengthy court battles with the goal of producing clear-cut ‘winners’ and ‘losers’. This move towards collaboration seeks to incorporate local factors of ecology, economics, and social values into the decision-making process, with participants hoping the outcomes will produce more than winners and losers.

As the importance of communities and collaboration began to be recognized, and with losses from wildfires in the WUI increasing each decade, state and federal government stressed the role of communities and collaborative processes in their fire policies, and the application of social science to fire issues began to take a higher priority in government agencies. In 2000 the National Fire Plan was developed. The Secretaries

of the Interior and Agriculture submitted a report to President Clinton titled *Managing the Impact of Wildfires on Communities and the Environment, A Report to the President in Response to the Wildfires of 2000*, giving Congressional direction for substantial new appropriations for wildland fire management. The Western Governors Association's plan titled *A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and the Environment- A 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy- Implementation Plan* provided an underlying process outlining specific goals, actions, and timeframes. The National Fire Plan prioritized long-term strategies for reducing wildfire risks to communities and the environment utilizing a collaborative, community based approach that recognized the importance of local level decision making (Kostishack and Rana 2002). The Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003 (HFRA) also targeted fuels reduction work in the WUI and specifically highlighted the importance of collaboration and public participation at the local community level (Sturtevant et al. 2005).

To receive funding priority from the National Fire Plan, communities had to prepare a Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP). A CWPP had to be collaboratively developed and prioritize and identify sites and methods for fuel reduction projects (Jakes et al. 2011). In a comprehensive synthesis of research on collaboration specifically addressing community wildfire threats and fuels management, some of the benefits of collaboration for the U.S. Forest Service and for communities were summarized as increased efficiency, trust-building, and capacity-building (Sturtevant et al. 2005).

While the federal government will continue to create national policies on wildfire planning and management, community-based initiatives stress the local. Brunson and Shindler (2004) found that local knowledge about fire and fuel issues varies geographically, as does acceptance. Their survey results argued against a uniform policy or strategy for fuels management, stating that consideration of the local community needed to be taken into account.

Community-based wildfire management can be seen as a way to bridge social and ecological objectives in wildfire management. Danks (2001) contrasted two ways of treating wildfire: As an “emergency” situation to be dealt with once a fire has started, or as a natural part of the forest ecosystem that can be planned for. Treating wildfire exclusively as an emergency tends to ignore and exacerbate socioeconomic problems faced by rural forest communities. Instead of utilizing local knowledge and skills in pre-fire planning, treating fire as an emergency calls in outside “expertise” in both fire fighting efforts, and post-fire management plans that may involve harvesting forest products either through “salvage logging” or thinning processes. By planning for wildfire using a community-based approach, Danks argued that pre- and post- fire thinning projects and “salvage logging” could be done by the locals, improving their socioeconomic situation and the health of their local forest. Danks stressed the value of local knowledge of forest ecology and fire history, and the importance of the continuity they provide compared to agency experts who are encouraged to be mobile and transfer frequently. This paper concluded that a community-based approach to wildfire management would do more to help the forest communities most impacted by wildfire,

and the ecological situation that is at the root of this issue, than traditional centralized management styles. However, in order to transition to this approach, communities would need to do some capacity-building, and agencies would need to change policy to incorporate community members in wildfire management and shift to treat wildfire as a necessary part of the forest ecosystem instead of as an unpredictable catastrophe.

In a paper that is a part of the compilation *Homeowners, Communities, and Wildfire: Science Findings from the National Fire Plan (2002)*, Jakes and others evaluated three communities' preparedness for wildfire using a model they developed. The authors found that communities with a "strong social foundation" that included social capital, cultural capital, and human capital were better prepared to take on long-term wildfire mitigation projects. The authors define social capital as "the community characteristics that contribute to collective social action" (7). Leadership and networks are critical components of social capital. Human capital is defined as "the knowledge and skills an individual obtains through education and training" (7). Cultural capital is similar to human capital in that it includes individuals' knowledge and skills, but these are obtained through "heritage, experience, and place attachment" (7). Agency involvement was determined to be an important social characteristic in community wildfire preparedness, providing expertise and skills as well as access to funding and outreach materials. The final characteristic of the strong social foundation the authors incorporate into their model was the landscape, specifically the social aspects of the landscape. Whether or not a community was an incorporated township or not, the boundaries of

public and private landholdings, and level of isolation can impact how a community functions.

Community fire safe programs have been initiated in Oregon, Washington, Nevada, and Illinois, as well as at the national level. Firewise USA is a national-level program aimed at design features of development, “defensible space”, and firesafe landscaping. Communities can be certified as Firewise communities by a Firewise representative in a nine step process, and must renew certification annually (Firewise USA 2012).

Project Wildfire is a community fire safe program originating in Deschutes County, Oregon. “Project Wildfire is the community organization that facilitates, educates, disseminates and maximizes community efforts towards effective fire planning and mitigation (Project Wildfire 2012).” They pride themselves on partnerships to increase efficiency and have helped with emergency evacuation routes, an Emergency Preparedness Network notification system, an automated weather station, and the FireFree program. FireFree is an educational program formed in 1997 that encourages homeowners to adopt defensible space measures around their homes. They facilitate this by offering free yard waste recycling once per year. They also offer a framework for establishing FireFree programs in other areas, though they currently are only found in Oregon (FireFree website 2012). Both the Firewise and FireFree programs began as centrally organized fire safety programs unlike the fire safe councils of California.

Sturtevant and McCaffrey (2006) compared the national Firewise Community program, FireFree in Oregon, and California’s Fire Safe Councils using Rogers’

Diffusion of Innovation Theory looking at compatibility, observability, simplicity, divisibility, and change agents to evaluate relative success at motivating community adoption of fire mitigation practices. They found the programs that fostered contact between neighbors and were compatible with local values were more likely to be adopted. The authors specifically cite the flexible and multiscale structure as a strength of California's Fire Safe Councils, making this community-based collaborative model accessible to a variety of communities.

Everett (2002) studied community participation in fire management planning in Trinity County, California, spearheaded by the Trinity County Fire Safe Council. This research highlighted the lack of true public participation in most public land management efforts. It was argued that efforts from agencies to involve the public were usually motivated by legal requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (1970) or the National Forest Management Act (1976), not by recognition of the value of incorporating local knowledge. In the case of wildfire planning and management, the author found that long-term local knowledge could be extremely helpful to short-term agency personnel assigned to the area and temporary emergency fire fighters who were given the authority for managing an unfamiliar area. The author concluded that the potential for involving people in fire management had been overlooked. In this case, the Trinity County Fire Safe Council initiated a collaborative, community-based pre-fire planning process in 1998. The local participants were familiar with the fire history of the area, the rugged terrain, roads and road conditions, and the fuel loading in the area. The fire safe council worked with community members across the county in multiple participatory community

mapping exercises using geographic information system (GIS) software. The completed GIS identified locations of concern and prioritized areas for fuels treatment work, and was shared with local land management agencies and emergency respondents. This report provided a framework for countywide collaborative processes in rural areas, and also demonstrated the value of local knowledge and participation.

Trinity County Fire Safe Council is just one of many fire safe councils that emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The case of fire safe councils represents an opportunity to analyze a widespread model of community-based fire management. The fire safe councils of California are the leading model of community-based fire management in the state with the largest WUI, but an analysis of how they are organized and how they relate to the state-level California Fire Safe Council is needed.

Organizational Theory

Within the literature on community based collaboration, some have noted differences in organizational structures and styles as barriers to effective collaboration. In a study of collaboration on public lands, Carr and others (1998) found that the Forest Service's organizational culture was cited as the biggest obstacle to successful collaboration, both by the Forest Service managers and outside collaborative partners. McKinney and Harmon identified legal constraints and intrinsic incompatibilities between the decentralized, collaborative, community based movements and the centralized, hierarchical government agencies as barriers to successful collaboration (2004). Organizational theory literature yields a wealth of information on strengths and

weaknesses of organizational models that can deepen our understanding of tensions between collaborative partners and offer suggestions for ways to work together.

Much has been written through the lens of organizational theory to explain how and why organizations are structured the way they are and how their organizational structure influences organizations' effectiveness. Historically, organizational theory concluded that there was one best way for an organization to be structured, beginning with Max Weber's writings on bureaucracy (1924). This left a lot of unexplained variation in organizational structure and more recent theorists have argued that there is no one best way to organize (Scott 1987). Contingency theory, emerging in the early 1960s held that: "The best way to organize depends on the nature of the environment to which the organization relates" (Scott 1987:87).

In the first chapter of *Social Movements and Organization Theory*, McAdam and Scott (2005) said of the shift to contingency theory:

"[Organizational Studies] began to gain traction with the recognition of the importance of the wider environment, first material resource and technical features, then political, and more recently, institutional and cultural forces" (p4).

In his book on contingency theory, Donaldson (2001) stated that organizational effectiveness can be contingent upon the environment, organizational size, and organizational strategy. Whether the environment is stable and homogenous or diverse and changing will affect the type of organization best suited to serve there. The organizational size contingency will affect how bureaucratic or rule-bound an organization is. The strategy contingency describes whether an organization is diversified

or focused on a single product or activity, and whether they are operating appropriately based on this. Donaldson argued that the organization's structure should take into account these three contingencies of environment, size, and strategy in order to operate with maximum efficiency and success.

Reviewing organizational behavior models, Stephen P. Robbins (1990) agreed that effective organizational strategy will be contingent upon the particular setting and situation in which it is being utilized (p12). He discussed variables involved in forming models to predict behavior: values and attitudes, personality, perception, motivation, learning, roles, norms, group dynamics, communication, leadership, power, conflict, organization structure, organizational culture, and organizational development.

Given that there is not one best way for all organizations to be structured, that instead the best structure for an organization depends on many contingency factors, what can be said about the varied organizational strategies of fire safe councils in California? One way to look at the case of fire safe councils in California is as a diverse group of grassroots organizations contrasted with the California Fire Safe Council as a centralized umbrella organization.

David Horton Smith (2000:7) defines grassroots associations as "locally based, significantly autonomous, volunteer-run, formal non-profits." These decentralized organizations have knowledge and power vested in the community in which they are working, typically rely heavily on volunteers, and when they adopt formal structure it is usually as a formal non-profit through the tax-exempt 501(c)3 status. This is in contrast to larger, centralized organizations relying on paid personnel, centralized instead of

place-based authority and knowledge, and hierarchical structure. Each of these types of organizing brings with it some established strengths and weaknesses that can help us understand some of the current tensions between the grassroots and centralized fire safe councils.

Lawrence and Lorsch's Contingency Model presented decentralized or less centralized organizations as best suited for a diverse or changing environment (1967). California definitely presents a heterogeneous environment, both ecologically and socially. Likewise, Donaldson (2001) described an organic participatory strategy as a better fit for an "unstable" or changing environment requiring innovation for maximum efficiency or benefit.

Volunteers are often found at the core of grassroots non-profit organizations. McDonald and Warburton (2003) studied volunteers in non-profit organizations in Australia. They found volunteers to be so central to the organizations that they were the drivers of change within the non-profit sector due to the diverse expertise and skills they bring to organizations. Singh and others (1991) found that the state is typically the most important actor in determining institutional change for volunteer organizations. This may be because many volunteer organizations are created to supplement lacking government services and/or because of reliance on government funding.

In a study of volunteer commitment to community-based watershed groups, Byron and Curtis (2002) found that a large proportion of their survey respondents were experiencing volunteer burnout. Another weakness of grassroots organizations is the

instability of their funding and tendency to have lower organizational resources (Walker and McCarthy 2010).

Centralized organizations are found to be well suited for a singular task (Scott 1987) and a stable environment (Donaldson 2001). Lawrence and Lorsch's Contingency Model presented formalized and hierarchical organizations as best suited to a homogenous environment (1967). This centralization of authority places very little value on decentralized, local knowledge and expertise. Related weaknesses of centralized authority have been their difficulty in gaining broad-reaching local support (Avina 2002) and difficulty in addressing regional variation (Clark et al. 2005).

In a study of watershed groups in Ohio looking at government involvement in collaborative, community-based watershed groups, the centralized organizations (in this case, a state agency) had higher organizational resources than the grassroots, but after one-year of state involvement, groups that had characteristics of both centralized and grassroots organizations had equally high organizational resources (Nikolic and Koontz 2008). Similarly, Singh and others (1991) found that existing organizations have a competitive edge when it comes to getting funding because their start-up costs have already been met.

Centralization can offer stability and consistency for organizations, but can also tend to reduce or ignore the influence of society around them (Friedland and Alford 1991) and exert more control over their subordinates (Thompson 1967). Organizational theory recognizes that parts of an organization are interdependent (Thompson 1967), so

care should be taken to recognize this interdependence as the centralized authority moves toward more hierarchical control.

A centralized organization has concentrated authority and decision-making (Pugh et al. 1968). Typically, larger organizations will tend to be more bureaucratic (Donaldson 2001), but the greater complexity that comes with bigger size also places strains on the autonomy of the organization's members, leading management to use impersonal mechanisms of control (Child 1972) that risk alienating members from both the work they are doing and the people they interact with in that work (Aiken and Hage 1966). Etzioni's Structuralist Model was critical of hierarchical power (1964). He argued that it was imperative for the subordinates to accept the power relations in order for a centralized organization to exert any control. He warned of inevitable tensions and strains between autonomy or personal interest and the centralized organizational interest.

Organizations are also dependent on external inputs or resources from the environment. External forces shaping organizations are the social networks, behaviors, and relationships surrounding the organizations (Powell and DiMaggio 1991). Power and interests shape the evolution of organizations.

An important component of this thesis was an analysis of strengths and weaknesses of centralized compared to grassroots level organizing for collaborative fire management in the case of the fire safe councils of California. Another way of organizing could be a networked or loosely coupled system between the decentralized and the centralized. Network governance has emerged with the increasing importance of non-hierarchical forms of governance, moving away from traditional command and

control regulation. Benefits of network coordination include enhanced learning, more efficient use of resources, increased capacity to plan for and address complex problems (Provan and Kenis 2007). In a paper on co-management and network governance in natural resource management, Carlsson and Sandstrom (2008) stressed the importance of the network structure. The authors hypothesized that a well-performing network structure would have diverse membership and have high levels of network density and centralization. They hypothesized that the heterogeneous makeup of actors involved in the network would bring increased knowledge, skills and competence, while high levels of connection and centralization would lead to a greater ability to achieve collective action. Evaluating the resilience of such a network, the authors cite a study focusing on information sharing in networks (Bodin and Norberg 2005) where the authors developed a model to find an optimal structure somewhere between a tightly connected structure that reduces autonomy among members and therefore also reduces the variety in knowledge and skills the subunits would bring in, and a less integrated and connected structure that would make joint decision-making more difficult, incorporating local context and allowing for more autonomy of its members.

Provan and Kenis (2007) provide three models of network governance. The first is a “shared governance” model or a “participant-governed network” where network members participate on an equal basis in a decentralized form. The second model is a “highly brokered” or “lead organization-governed network” where network members have few organization-to-organization interactions and the network is governed by a single organization in a highly centralized arrangement. The third model is referred to as

a “network administrative organization” where a separate entity is set up to handle the administration and governance of the network, but does not provide its own services like the other members. In this centralized model network members still interact with one another, but the network administrator is responsible for coordinating and sustaining the network.

Weick (1976) described loose coupling in education organizations as a situation in which elements are responsive, but retain evidence of separateness and identity. Some have found the concept of loosely coupled systems to be ambiguous and vague (Beekun and Glick 2001, Orton and Weick 1990), and strive for a solid definition. For the purposes of this thesis, loosely coupled systems need only be understood as an alternate organizational structure that seeks to integrate the conflicting ideas of connection and autonomy. This method of organization acknowledges a certain level of autonomy of its subunits. Important questions of what is coupled and what remains separate in a loosely coupled system need to be asked, but these somewhat less hierarchical and bureaucratic models of organizational structure may provide a way of avoiding some of the tensions and conflict that have arisen between grassroots and centralized organizations.

From my review of organizational theory literature, I developed a framework of strengths and weaknesses for each type of organizing (Figure 1). I will compare interview based feedback from those involved in fire safe councils to this framework to see if the strengths and weaknesses of these organizational structures are found in their experiences. This thesis research explored the questions: How have fire safe councils organized to respond to wildfire in the WUI in California? Based on the analytical

framework developed from organizational theory, what are strengths and potential weaknesses of the organizational structure and relationships among fire safe councils?

Grassroots Organizations	
Strengths	Weaknesses
Suited for heterogeneous environment (Scott 1987); place based	Though volunteer-run, state may still be driver of change (Singh et al. 1991)
Volunteers bring varied knowledge and skills (McDonald & Warburton 2003)	Unstable funding (Walker and McCarthy 2010)
Easy entry/low start-up costs (Singh et al. 1991)	Volunteer burn-out (Byron and Curtis 2002)
Utilizing local knowledge can be more cost effective and ultimately better for the environment and local community (Danks 2001), responsive to local conditions and needs.	
Centralized Organizations	
Strengths	Weaknesses
Suited for homogeneous task (Scott 1987)	Difficulty addressing regional variation (Clark et al. 2005)
Once existing, competitive edge on getting funding (Singh et al. 1991)	Hierarchical power must be recognized (Etzioni 1964)
More stability and consistency (Friedland and Alford 1991)	May have trouble gaining broad-reaching local support (Avina 2002)
Higher institutional resources (Nikolic and Koontz 2008)	
Networked Governance/Loosely Coupled Systems	
Strengths	Weaknesses
Members can maintain autonomy to be responsive to their local context (Carlsson and Sandstrom 2008)	If network is too “loose,” may have trouble with joint decision making and collective action (Bodin and Norberg 2005)
Utilizes diverse membership bringing a variety of skills and knowledge (Carlsson and Sandstrom 2008)	If network is too “tight,” member autonomy will be reduced, along with utilization of varied knowledge and skills (Bodin and Norberg 2005)

Figure 1: Framework for analysis from review of organizational theory literature.

METHODS

This study involves qualitative research, seeking to gain a better understanding of a complex human phenomenon (Marshall and Rossman 1999). I employed multiple qualitative research methods: participant observation, document analysis, interviews and interview coding and analysis. During this research I was able to attend several community fire safe council meetings and a California Fire Safe Council meeting, as well as the 2008 Pacific Coast Fire Conference hosted by the California Association for Fire Ecology. I followed updates on the California Fire Safe Council's website including meeting minutes and news updates. I joined an online group formed to share fire safe council information with 85 members through emails and message posting. Through this online forum I was able to stay informed about issues such as the California Fire Safe Council's move to register trademarks currently used by local fire safe councils and the California senate resolution to recognize fire safe councils (SCR 80 2008), which led me to track down and analyze documents from the US Patent and Trademark Office as well as the California senate.

I conducted interviews with participants selected to represent the range of fire safe councils operating in California. Interviews carried out for this research built on earlier survey research conducted with Dr. Yvonne Everett in the summer of 2006 (Everett and Fuller 2011) in which we contacted fire safe councils listed on the California Fire Safe Council's website (California Fire Safe Council 2006c). Participants interviewed were a subset of the participants drawn from the survey. For the interviews I wanted to capture

the diversity of grassroots fire safe councils to hear where a unified or common voice might exist, and where they diverge. I sought to understand how the grassroots organizations interacted with the California Fire Safe Council, and other agencies or community groups. The interviews allowed me to ask follow up questions to the survey on potentially sensitive issues about their organization and the state level California Fire Safe Council, Inc.

The diversity of “types” of fire safe councils I sought to interview were: groups from various geographic regions in California; urban and rural communities; community and county-level fire safe councils; groups with varying levels of fundraising success; of various ages; organizational structures; and groups with and without completed Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPP). Figure 2 presents a table of qualities participating fire safe councils were categorized by to attempt to get a stratified sample of “types” of fire safe councils. The categories were determined from survey results (Everett and Fuller 2011). For fundraising rank, I divided the amount of money the fire safe council listed on their survey (total amount raised) by the number of years they had been active to get an average amount of funds raised per year. I then ranked them into the following categories: \$0-\$10,000 was low, \$10,001-\$90,000 was medium, and \$90,001 and up was high. Their organizational structure was categorized by whether or not they were a tax-exempt 501(c)3, if they were associated with an umbrella organization like a Resource Conservation District or Watershed Council, or if they worked alone. How long each fire safe council had been active, whether they operated at a local community or county level, and whether they had completed a CWPP were chosen as indicators of

organizational capacity. However, with the wide variety of structures and activities that fire safe councils take on, incorporating as a 501(c)3 and other potential indicators of capacity may not be necessary for every group. In some cases a fire safe council may be a neighborhood group working together to clear brush from roadways and around structures and may not see the need to go through the formal process of becoming a 501 (c)3 or developing an approved CWPP.

Region Of CA	Urban/Rural	Level	Org structure	FSC start	Fundraising Rank	CWPP
Central	Suburban	County	Under county (not 501(c)3)	1989	Low	No
North	Rural	County	RCD	1998	High	Yes
North	Rural	Community	Watershed Council	2001	High	No
South	Urban	Community	501(c)3	2002	Medium	Yes
South	Urban	County	501(c)3	2002	High	Yes
South	Suburban	Community	501(c)3	2003	Medium	Yes
North	Rural	County	501(c)3	2004	Medium	Yes
Central	Rural	Community	Not 501(c)3	2005	Low	No

Figure 2. Fire safe councils interviewed for this thesis broken out into categories.

Participants were contacted by email and phone to schedule interviews; participation was completely voluntary. Representatives of eight fire safe councils and one from the California Fire Safe Council were interviewed. I asked participants about the leadership of their fire safe council, the role of volunteers in their fire safe council, strengths and weaknesses of their fire safe council, whether or not they collaborate with other groups, what their definition of a fire safe council was, what they thought the role of the California Fire Safe Council has been and should be, and what they thought of the California Fire Safe Council's pilot fire safe council certification program. Interviews were conducted in person when possible, but most were over the telephone and lasted an average of 35 minutes. Interviews were structured, with each participant answering the same questions. Participants were typically a director or other primary official of the organization. The interview questions are listed in Appendix A.

The results of these interviews were coded and compared to the analytical framework presented in the Literature Review. Each strength or weakness from the analytical framework was not addressed by all respondents. Some, like the strength of volunteers, unstable funding of grassroots organizations, and the centralized organization's difficulty addressing regional variation, were addressed by all respondents. Others, like volunteer burn-out and the state being the ultimate driver of change, were addressed by half or fewer of the respondents. Some of these were very closely related or opposite sides of the same issue, like the strength of grassroots organizations' ability to adapt to heterogeneous environments and the weakness of centralized organizations in

their difficulty addressing regional variation. These data provided the basis for the analysis of the models of organizational structure adopted by fire safe councils and the networks in which fire safe councils have been operating.

CASE STUDY: FIRE SAFE COUNCILS IN CALIFORNIA

In California, there is a movement for community based wildfire management and planning in fire safe councils forming across the state. Fire safe councils exist at various levels from grassroots, local community groups to countywide organizations to the state-wide council. Some fire safe councils are a branch of a Resource Conservation District (RCD), a watershed council or restoration council, or county government. Their activities focus mostly on fuels reduction but also include planning, outreach, and policy work (Everett and Fuller 2011). Outreach activities vary from producing brochures for homeowners about defensible space, information booths at a county fair, neighborhood meetings, and even dinner parties. At the time of this research, there were over 150 active fire safe councils in California, ranging from the coast to the interior and northern and southern ends of the state. A few counties still apparently did not have a fire safe council, but many counties had more than one. San Diego County had more than 50 councils.

In a survey of California's fire safe councils (Everett and Fuller 2011), with 28 councils responding, there seemed to be a divide between councils that were incorporated as tax-exempt non-profit organizations (501(c)3) and those that were not, with nearly half of the councils surveyed not formally incorporated. Only three councils reported working alone, while seven unincorporated fire safe councils reported working through an incorporated umbrella organization, such as a Resource Conservation District. Many of the councils reporting in the survey (63%) had adopted a formal structure including a Board of Directors and monthly meetings. Grassroots fire safe councils were involved in

a range of activities, with most reporting spending the largest portion of their energies on fuel reduction activities, followed by public outreach and planning.

The multiple scales at which grassroots fire safe councils operate makes them broadly adaptable to local communities, and this range in scales and leadership can facilitate networking (Sturtevant et al. 2006). Grassroots fire safe councils have sought to create networks for information sharing, both informally like the Local Fire Safe Council Yahoo! Group online and more formally, like the regional meetings held by councils in northern California and the very newly formed Fire Safe Communities Association, formed by grassroots fire safe council representatives with the mission to “connect organizations involved with making their communities safe from wildfire” (Fire Safe Communities Association website 2012).

The state-level fire safe council was formed in 1993. The California Fire Safe Council began as a project sponsored under the auspices of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection’s (CDF) statewide Fire Prevention Education Program. The CDF supported this initial form of the California Fire Safe Council from 1993 to 2001 by providing funding for educational materials, a web site, and a monthly board meeting for state-level fire safe organizing. As CDF began to phase out its funding for the state Fire Safe Council, the California Fire Safe Council found a new niche in helping the federal agencies distribute newly allocated funds through the National Fire Plan (2000) for fire safe projects on private lands, which has evolved to the grants clearinghouse. During this time, the California Fire Safe Council hired an Executive Director and requested grant funding to continue to operate its education programs, web site, and meetings. The

California Fire Safe Council worked with the Sacramento Regional Foundation to administer the funds for a brief time, but shortly thereafter decided to form a 501(c)(3) corporation to be able to administer the grants themselves. In mid-2002 they emerged as the California Fire Safe Council, Inc. with the mission to "...preserve and enhance California's manmade and natural resources by providing leadership and support that mobilizes all Californians to protect their homes, communities and environment from wildfires" (California Fire Safe Council 2012). The California Fire Safe Council presents itself as a partnership of 50 public and private organizations representing a broad range of interests; including the insurance industry, federal land management agencies, realtors and developers, air quality boards, fire professionals associations, and state and national level environmental organizations. It is unclear what it means to be a partner though. Their website lists a staff of eight and a fifteen member Board of Directors (California Fire Safe Council 2012). The staff includes an Executive Director and Business Manager, the rest are devoted to grants and the grants clearinghouse run by the California Fire Safe Council.

A major accomplishment of the California Fire Safe Council has been the creation and maintenance of a "one-stop-shop" grants clearinghouse with funds from the National Fire Plan to make it easier for local fire safe councils to access available federal funding. In 2012 over four million dollars were distributed through the grants clearinghouse (California Fire Safe Council 2012). Prior to the existence of the grants clearinghouse, local fire safe councils had to apply for funding from the various state and federal funding agencies separately. Some of the California Fire Safe Council's other goals

include distributing fire prevention education materials, evaluating fire safety legislation, and encouraging communities to form local fire safe councils. The California Fire Safe Council claims it has “united its diverse membership to speak with one voice about fire safety” and “empowered grassroots organizations to spearhead fire safety programs” (California Fire Safe Council 2012).

In 2006 the California Fire Safe Council made efforts to protect the Fire Safe Council logo and the “Fire Safe California” slogan by applying to register the logo and slogan as trademarks, and introducing a “smart growth” pilot program for local fire safe councils as a “draft concept about the relationship between local fire safe councils and the state fire safe council” (California Fire Safe Council 2006b)¹. One grassroots council filed a formal opposition to the trademark application by the California Fire Safe Council (US Patent and Trademark Office 2007) and ultimately the trademark application was withdrawn (US Patent and Trademark Office 2009).

The “smart growth” pilot program was explained as an affiliate program at first, but after much feedback and concern from local fire safe councils (California Fire Safe Council 2006a; California Fire Safe Council 2006b) about what it would take to become an “affiliate” as well as what it would mean if you opted out of the program (would a group still be able to call itself a fire safe council, would they be able to apply for funding through the clearinghouse, etc.), it became known as a certified “excellence” pilot program. The California Fire Safe Council said that to qualify for a certification of

¹ It is unclear at this time what happened with either of these projects as this information is from the most recent meeting minutes posted on the California Fire Safe Council website.

excellence councils would have to have IRS charitable donation status; a “complementary mission to the California Fire Safe Council;” and written policies and procedures for accounting, personnel, purchasing, travel and human resources. Further, councils would have to have an audit committee and undergo an annual audit by independent auditors; have links to a countywide CWPP; and pay an annual membership fee. The California Fire Safe Council listed as example benefits of this certification: priority for certain grants, access to peer networking and idea sharing sessions facilitated by the California Fire Safe Council, official use of trademarked Fire Safe Council logo and name, and other minor perks.

In 2008 the California State Senate passed a resolution to “recognize that Fire Safe Councils serve as leading community-based wildfire preparedness organizations and the vital services provided by Fire Safe Councils for the citizens of California.” (California State Senate 2008a. SCR 80: Relative to California Fire Safe Council). The language initially recognized only the California Fire Safe Council, Inc., but many grassroots fire safe councils wrote letters to explain that they are separate and unique from the state group and that the bill needed to recognize fire safe councils (Local Fire Safe Council Network Yahoo! Group, personal communications March 5-11, 2008). The language in the bill was changed to reflect this before being passed (California State Senate 2008b. SCR 80 amended: Relative to Fire Safe Councils).

Fire safe councils in California began as grassroots organizations attempting to fill a need in their communities. The addition of the state-level California Fire Safe Council marked the beginning of a time of rapid increase in the number of fire safe

councils in the state, but also the beginning of conflicts over organization and access to resources. The California Fire Safe Council acts as an intermediary between the fire safe councils and federal agencies by distributing government funding created for community wildfire prevention work. The California Fire Safe Council's claims of "uniting its diverse membership," their pilot certification program of grassroots fire safe councils and application to control via trademark the fire safe council name, logo, and mission are examples of ways they project their identity as a centralized organization with a hierarchical relationship to grassroots fire safe councils.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Grassroots fire safe councils have been operating and multiplying throughout California's landscape over the past two decades. These groups perform a variety of tasks with the overarching goal of reducing wildfire threats and losses in their communities. They operate at multiple scales from the local community to county level to regional networks to the statewide California Fire Safe Council. The organizational strategies of grassroots fire safe councils are varied and different from that of the California Fire Safe Council and this may affect their capacity to achieve their goals.

Most of the councils interviewed had a fire professional in a leadership position or heavily involved in the formation of the council. Many fire safe council representatives I spoke with mentioned the importance of collaboration in their work. One fire safe council representative went on to list all of the agencies and community groups that their fire safe council collaborated with, concluding that "we work hand in hand with other agencies." Fire safe council representatives mentioned collaborations with small local groups like a community services district or local fire department, as well as larger agencies such as the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CalFire), the Bureau of Land Management and the United States Forest Service. The groups that collaborated stressed the importance of collaboration in getting grant funding and community support for a project, as well as being able to draw upon a larger team to accomplish the goals of the project.

All but one council interviewed relied heavily on volunteers to accomplish these tasks and several mentioned the diverse backgrounds of their volunteers as a strength of their fire safe council. When asked how many paid employees their fire safe council had, answers ranged from zero to four, with the higher numbers coming from groups operating under an umbrella organization such as a Resource Conservation District.

When asked how they would define a fire safe council, the representatives interviewed universally spoke of a place-based, locally focused group addressing issues of wildfire and community fire safety. There were no qualifications made about organizational requirements, and there was no mention of other organizations or the state-level California Fire Safe Council. There was support and criticism voiced over both the registration of the logo and the pilot “excellence” program from local fire safe councils. Some were supportive of some kind of structure and increased accountability for using the title “fire safe council” and logo, others were concerned about some councils not having the resources to meet program guidelines.

Many local fire safe council representatives interviewed said that the California Fire Safe Council has, for the most part, been welcomed by the local fire safe councils glad for the assistance and support. In recent years the California Fire Safe Council has been claiming increasing authority. One example of this would be the grants clearinghouse which effectively controls the distribution of much of the federal fire money that goes to local councils. The grants clearinghouse has simplified the application process for federal funding for grassroots councils, but has also concentrated power in the hands of the California Fire Safe Council without much transparency in the selection

process for distributing funds. The “smart growth” or “excellence” pilot program to certify fire safe councils and the California Fire Safe Council’s application to trademark certain fire safe logos and slogans are further moves towards consolidating power, which some grassroots councils have opposed as infringement upon their autonomy.

Organizational theory has described some of the benefits of centralized organizations and grassroots organizations, as well as some of the weaknesses of each. In the following section, I apply the analytical framework derived from the organizational theory literature to the case of fire safe councils in California, beginning with the strengths and weaknesses of grassroots organizing.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Grassroots Fire Safe Councils

Many of the strengths attributed to grassroots organizations in the literature are supported by interview findings. Especially important seems to be the breadth and depth of local knowledge and skills found within the fire safe councils and their partners (volunteers, agencies, fire departments, homeowners, and the like) (McDonald and Warburton 2003). For example, one fire safe council receives valuable input from Native American tribal members about the fire history of the area, while another is happy to count in its leadership a retired county supervisor with insights into the local political process. This variety in knowledge base is also relevant to the heterogeneous nature of the environment in California (Scott 1987). Local grassroots fire safe councils are able to draw upon these strengths to act in their unique environment – the media person might be critical to a fire safe council in a more populated area while the retired CDF fire chief is a

critical member for a FSC working in a rural part of the state adjacent to private industrial forest land.

Several times, the “uniqueness” of an individual fire safe council’s area came up. “We are different than most fire safe councils.” “Each fire safe council has a very unique profile, location, and population.” When talking about their area, fire safe council representatives also mentioned the necessary fluidness of their organization in terms of participation and projects. “We can survey around the local area and see what needs to be done and what is feasible for a volunteer organization.” Grassroots fire safe councils adopt varied organizational structures to best serve their varied communities. There are grassroots fire safe councils operating under umbrella organizations such as a homeowner’s association, watershed council, Resource Conservation District, or a countywide fire safe council, as well as those operating independently. Interviewees were wary of the proposed California Fire Safe Council certification program as a “one-size-fits-all” approach that wouldn’t work for all fire safe councils. “Definition of a fire safe council varies depending on where you are.”

Interviewees reported that their fire safe councils utilized much local knowledge through members, participants, and collaboration with other local groups. These included seasonal and permanent homeowners and residents, local fire professionals, tribal basket weavers, and land management agency personnel. “They know their area best.” “Our director is from the area.” Many interviewees stressed the importance of working with other local groups and having their own community fire safe council. “We work closely with other local groups and share data collected.” “It’s important to have our own fire

safe council even though we could technically fall under the county fire safe council and CWPP.” “Neighborhood liaison program pays people to coordinate information for their neighborhood.”

Community fire safe councils value local knowledge. Local knowledge can be indigenous knowledge on forest ecology and fire history, or homeowners’ knowledge of their property and neighborhood with regards to clearing done or improvements made. Some interviewees mentioned the importance of sharing information with vacation homeowners who may not be as tied into the community. This can be especially important in projects that really rely on broad-scale adoption like creating defensible space or evacuation routes. One rural fire safe council noted the importance of involving people who have spent many years or grown up in the area as opposed to land management and fire “professionals” who are typically transplanted from other areas. Utilizing local knowledge can lead to a fuller understanding of complex fire ecology issues as well as aid in community rebuilding, education, and land-use planning. These strengths of place based organizations were identified in the organizational theory literature (Danks 2001).

Volunteers have played a major role in fire safe councils and are mentioned as both a strength and a weakness for grassroots organizations in the framework. “Volunteers bring to the fire safe council a tremendous amount of expertise from their business and professional lives.” “Volunteers are the essence of fire safe councils.” “Volunteers are essential, passionate... there through thick and thin.”

The idea that grassroots organizations suffer from volunteer burn-out (Byron and Curtis 2002) was not widely mentioned, but some interviewees touched on the fragility of volunteer organizations. A few participants mentioned the difficulty in maintaining interest in the fire safe councils over time by among both volunteers and the general community, “we have a core group that does all the work; we need to bring in others.” One of the more institutionalized fire safe councils and the California Fire Safe Council representative stressed paying people for their work to add accountability and decrease burn-out. “A completely volunteer run organization can be a bit fragile. People that are paid may have more follow-through. We try not to rely too much on volunteers.”

Without moving away from their grassroots, volunteer-run foundation, fire safe councils will be dealing with organizational weaknesses in the future. They can look to other grassroots, volunteer-run organizations for advice, or to innovations from other fire safe councils shared in regional networking meetings or via the online Local Fire Safe Council Network Yahoo Group. For example, in our survey research we learned of one fire safe council in suburban southern California that was also a homeowner’s association. This can allow for a portion of homeowner’s dues to cover costs for clearing shared areas and incorporating defensible space into their Covenants, Conditions, and Restrictions. Since it is an organization that the members already belong to, they do not have to see fire safe activities as an additional strain on their time.

It has been relatively easy for a community to start a fire safe council. Start up costs have been low, with relatively easy entry into the field, in part because there were no formal requirements for what it meant to be a fire safe council. Many of the

representatives I spoke with mentioned beginning with a motivated community member with a drive to improve their community's fire preparedness, often assisted by knowledgeable community members from either CDF or a volunteer fire department. The voluntary basis of fire safe councils has enabled this. The start-up costs may be low (Singh et al. 1991), but to do any projects they do need to find funding.

The instability of funding grassroots organizations (Walker and McCarthy 2010) was mentioned by nearly all interviewed, even the California Fire Safe Council representative. Smaller, local fire safe councils expressed stronger concern about this. This has been the main area where the centralized structure of the California Fire Safe Council has been helpful to grassroots fire safe councils, especially the grants clearinghouse.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Centralized California Fire Safe Council

Results from interviews with local fire safe council representatives and a board member from the California Fire Safe Council offer support for the strengths and weaknesses found in the analytical framework from organizational theory literature. The California Fire Safe Council, acting as a centralized authority, does bring with it the strengths of increased resources, stability, and proven ability to get funding, while having trouble gaining broad reaching support in local communities. There is also tension around the undefined relationship between the statewide council and grassroots councils, with unaddressed issues of power recognition.

When the California Fire Safe Council formed, there were already grassroots fire safe councils operating in some communities. In this way, the state-level council may not truly be a centralized organization for the grassroots councils, but it has become more of a central authority with the formation of the grants clearinghouse, and has been seeking a more centralized and hierarchical role with the application to trademark the logo and control its use through a certification program for fire safe councils.

Centralized organizations are well-suited for a homogenous task (Scott 1987). While all fire safe councils, including the California Fire Safe Council, may think that they have a homogenous task of increasing fire safety for their community, that task might actually be more complex than they recognize. The grassroots organizations carry out fuels reduction and defensible space projects, community outreach, and work with fire agencies and legislators on fire safety-related topics. They are able to move from one type of project to the next. The centralized California Fire Safe Council has been most successful when it focused on a homogenous task, like the grants clearinghouse. This has been their most successful task. The California Fire Safe Council board member I interviewed for this thesis said that the “principle role” of their board was to administer the grants clearinghouse and advocate for funding to allocate to fire safe projects around the state. The grants clearinghouse is helpful to both the government agencies looking to fund community-level fire safe projects, and the grassroots fire safe councils seeking funding. The idea for a “one-stop-shop” for the new funding allocations from the National Fire Plan had come up with the original version of the state-level Fire Safe Council (funded through CDF) with input from grassroots fire safe councils on its

development. When the newer California Fire Safe Council has tried to expand their scope they have not found broad support, such as when they proposed the affiliate program for fire safe councils. Outside of the funding that they offer the grassroots, they seem to have much less influence over the grassroots groups than they may have thought.

When questioned about the California Fire Safe Council, fire safe council representatives expressed concerns with the inability of the centralized organization to understand their part of the state. “If you have to fit into boxes, people in rural parts of the state may just walk away.” Organizational theory suggests that centralized organizations may have trouble both addressing regional variation (Clark et al. 2005) and gaining broad-reaching local support (Avina 2002). Several participants thought that the state fire safe council would not have the support of their community and mentioned the possibility of their fire safe council disassociating from the California Fire Safe Council if they followed through with their move to define and certify community fire safe councils. “We’re talking about joining the Fire Alliance and not applying to the new fire safe council program.”

Grassroots fire safe council representatives are concerned that a centralized organization will not understand their unique area and will not be broadly accepted in their community. Several participants mentioned the increased neighbor-to-neighbor communication as a very positive side effect of their fire safe council work, giving local grassroots organizations a powerful tool in gaining broad-reaching local support that might elude a larger, centralized organization.

Several fire safe council representatives interviewed made comments about the California Fire Safe Council bringing some forms of stability and/or consistency to fire safe council work (Friedland and Alford 1991). For example, the California Fire Safe Council's grants clearinghouse made funding more stable and accessible for some community fire safe councils. "The California Fire Safe Council is totally essential in getting the grants and managing the grants for all of us." Local fire safe councils may also serve as a "centralized" organization- some county-level fire safe councils may serve as a 'hub' organization for local fire safe councils in the area.

The local fire safe council representatives and California Fire Safe Council board member interviewed for this research agreed that resources are a definite strength for the California Fire Safe Council and centralized organizing (Nikolic and Koontz 2008). It is a widely recognized weakness that grassroots organizations often struggle with obtaining consistent funding and it has historically been difficult for the grassroots fire safe councils to negotiate the complex and varied funding applications from different agencies. The California Fire Safe Council has been a tremendous help to community fire safe councils in this regard with their grants clearinghouse, a one-stop-shop for grassroots fire safe councils to apply for funding from several federal agencies. A few fire safe councils mentioned feeling specifically left out of the California Fire Safe Council clearinghouse funding system for not fitting into certain criteria (i.e.- not having a CWPP developed). Several interview respondents suggested that the California Fire Safe Council may leave even more community fire safe councils out if it moves forward with plans to further define what a fire safe council is. So while resources are a strength that a

centralized authority can bring to a relationship with grassroots organizations, issues of hierarchy and power and who gets to participate may cloud the subject.

Several fire safe councils interviewed mentioned the credibility and legitimacy that the California Fire Safe Council offers as a positive benefit of the centralized organization. “Setting standards for what makes a good fire safe council is important so that you don’t have really sub-standard things happening.” “The fire safe council logo has to mean something.” The ability of the California Fire Safe Council to run the grants clearinghouse was mentioned by all participants. “The California Fire Safe Council is great at administering the clearinghouse and getting money on the ground in California.” The California Fire Safe Council board member also mentioned credibility as a major strength of the centralized organization.

A few fire safe council representatives thought very highly of the fact that the California Fire Safe Council was making the case for fire safe councils across the state, lobbying on behalf of fire safe councils, and coordinating regional meetings for representatives to get to know one another and discuss common problems and solutions. The fire safe councils may be overstating the centralized authority’s case here; California Fire Safe Council board members have had very minimal interaction with California’s legislators (the first formal meetings with legislators occurred in 2009), and while regional networking meetings have been organized by grassroots fire safe councils, the California Fire Safe Council’s only effort towards this effect at the time of my research had been to move its board meetings to different areas of the state. The California Fire Safe Council board member stated that a weakness of the centralized organization is that

they did not have a good process to encourage information to come up from the local fire safe councils. Grassroots fire safe councils have performed networking and lobbying activities outside of the scope of the California Fire Safe Council; such as when grassroots councils pressured State Legislature to change the language in Senate Concurrent Resolution 80 to be more inclusive of the grassroots councils, and that several annual networking meetings have been organized by fire safe councils in Northern California.

An interesting component of the legitimacy that the California Fire Safe Council brings is a fear among several fire safe council representatives that a rogue group might call itself a fire safe council but engage in activities that would damage the reputation of fire safe councils across the state. No specific activities were identified, but this idea was surprisingly pervasive. Some fire safe council representatives who mentioned appreciating the legitimacy that the California Fire Safe Council brings to their work and voiced their support of the pilot program to certify fire safe councils, cited one reason being to protect against this vague concept of an incongruous council. The California Fire Safe Council board member expressed support for the certification program for grassroots fire safe councils in that it would “strengthen the credibility of the fire safe council name and prevent it from being co-opted.”

From the organizational theory framework, we see that in order to be effective, a centralized authority must have its hierarchical power recognized (Etzioni 1964). Participants from the grassroots fire safe councils discussed the California Fire Safe Council as having a wanted and unwanted hand in their organizations. Some fire safe

councils worry about losing control, while rural communities have general distrust of another organization/bureaucracy. “California Fire Safe Council’s ‘streamlining’ efforts may take away power and motivation of individual homeowners.” Others saw hierarchical control from California Fire Safe Council as a necessity with the increasing number of grassroots councils. “With growth there has to be some control so if you’re going to be a part of it you have to agree to the rules.”

Viewing the timeline of events since the arrival of the California Fire Safe Council on the scene, we see that the statewide organization can have an influence in what direction the grassroots fire safe councils head. One grassroots fire safe council said about the California Fire Safe Council, “they’re like the regional branch of the Forest Service, I never know who they are or go to see them, but they have a lot to say about what happens.” We see this with the increasing number of councils forming under this model, utilizing the grants clearinghouse for funding and the California Fire Safe Council website for information and outreach materials. We see this in the increasing statewide recognition of fire safe councils with Senate Concurrent Resolution 80, increasing funding requirements like requiring grassroots fire safe councils to have a CWPP, and also in this move towards developing certification guidelines for fire safe councils.

The path from CDF’s California Fire Safe Council to the California Fire Safe Council, Inc. did not make it immediately clear that there was or would be a hierarchy among fire safe councils. Clearly with their effort to encompass the whole state they were to be a centralized organization, but they didn’t immediately make any moves to

have any authority over community fire safe councils. At first they were simply a source of information for communities wishing to start a council. The development of the grants clearinghouse not only helped secure and distribute funding for fire safe councils, but also was a step (intentional or not) toward a centralized assertion of control and authority over community fire safe councils. One interviewee said, “I do like the online application and reporting process, but in some ways going through the central agency has limited our communication with the grantors.”

However, not all fire safe councils are opposed to the increasing authority of the California Fire Safe Council. Some are supportive of increased control because of the resources gained through a relationship with the centralized authority and others see it as necessary to prevent the name from being abused or co-opted in some way. Unaddressed issues of power and a lack of meaningful coordination and involvement between community fire safe councils and the California Fire Safe Council are acting very much as a dividing force in this movement.

Working Together?

The community fire safe councils of California have shown themselves to be idiosyncratic, grassroots organizations, showing strength in their rootedness to place and capacity to collaborate with larger organizations. Some parts of the state have a county-level fire safe council acting as an umbrella organization with several local fire safe councils operating in the same county. This type of connection can enable the smaller fire

safe councils to tackle larger projects, however, many local fire safe councils lack this linkage and coordination.

The California Fire Safe Council has emerged as a self-appointed umbrella organization and centralized authority for the grassroots fire safe councils. The nagging question of its legitimacy as a centralized authority plagues its relationship to the grassroots fire safe councils. The grants clearinghouse has provided a mechanism to nearly force the grassroots councils to accept and acknowledge the California Fire Safe Council, but even their website leaves the question of who they are and who they represent somewhat muddled as they list their fifty “members” comprised of private and public organizations from industry and government while their vision statement includes language about empowering grassroots organizations.

As the grassroots fire safe councils of California and the California Fire Safe Council continue to work in the same sphere, in the absence of a clearly defined working relationship, tensions that have come up largely around issues of power and legitimacy will continue to go unresolved and may escalate. Many of the key tensions defined in the literature are found in current relations between the centralized California Fire Safe Council and grassroots fire safe councils. Combining these approaches, using a model of networked governance or a loosely coupled system, may help both types of organizations if they are able to maintain the benefits of each. Attention needs to be paid to avoiding some of the shortcomings the literature has described for each method of organizing.

Examples of models of networked governance and loosely coupled systems that have been effective are described in the literature. Provan and Kenis (2007) describe

examples of shared governance working in the business sector with smaller, multi-firm partnerships where the outcome of their collaboration exceeds what they could accomplish individually without entering multi-firm ownership. They cite many examples of lead organization-governed networks from the health and human services sector where a lead organization has the resources and legitimacy to play this role to its constituent members, like a hospital or health clinic. Educational institutions are often studied as loosely coupled systems, with teachers having loose ties to their students and one another (Weick 1976). In each of these cases, there are specific aspects of the organizations involved that lead this model of organizational structure to be effective. A final note about loosely coupled systems from Orton and Weick (1990) is that these organizational models “are not failed bureaucracies, but distinct organizational forms” (219).

Organizational theory offers some insight on mechanisms for structuring relationships between diverse organizations. Organizational structures like network governance or a loosely coupled system could offer solutions for grassroots and centralized organizations to work together. Working under a network governance system would theoretically increase information sharing and cohesiveness of the fire safe councils, but whether the member grassroots fire safe councils would settle for some decreased autonomy is unknown. A loosely coupled network structure might allow for more autonomy of the grassroots members, but would the grassroots and centralized organizations be able to agree upon what is coupled and what remains separate and autonomous in order to work better together? Would the centralized organization be

willing to accept a level of autonomy of the grassroots and accept a loosely coupled system of organization instead of something more hierarchical?

CONCLUSIONS

As wildfires continue to burn up properties and resources in the WUI each year with seeming increasing vigor, fire safe councils in California will no doubt continue their work. Unfortunately, the organizational struggles that were the focus of this thesis look like they will also continue.

Collaborative processes and community-based approaches are increasing in popularity and use in natural resource management and planning, especially in the western United States. This is in response to decades of centralized, hierarchical authority that devalued local knowledge and citizen participation, relying instead on scientists and experts. The value of local knowledge and participation is now being touted in this movement towards collaborative, community-based processes, with promised benefits such as increased efficiency, building trust, and increased community capacity. We are beginning to see these models emerge in wildfire management and community fire safe planning, of which the fire safe councils of California are a part.

A developing and expanding wildland-urban interface has lead to increased numbers of people and homes at risk of wildfire losses, and skyrocketing costs of fire suppression. With the increased attention to fire issues after several severe fire years, along with the creation of the California Fire Safe Council, individuals and communities are taking (and must take) more responsibility for wildfire planning and management. Fire safe councils in California provide a model of networked community-based wildfire groups. Other fire safe programs offer centralized management organizations that focus

on educating homeowners on actions that can help save their homes, maintaining the status quo of self-interest as the motivation for involvement, not community well-being, and as a result may miss out on some of the benefits of a more community-based collaborative model. Fire safe councils are so varied that while some are catering to homeowners' self-interest, others offer true community-based management approaches that include community residents that are not homeowners and work on areas within the community that are outside of homeowners' private property.

The effect of a statewide umbrella organization on this grassroots movement is unknown. Tensions have come up between the local fire safe councils and the California Fire Safe Council about increased "streamlining" efforts (Sturtevant and McCaffrey 2006) and a pilot program to certify fire safe councils. At the core of these tensions are the inherent differences between grassroots organizing and centralized authority. Each organizational strategy can offer strengths to the other, but there are also weaknesses associated with each to beware of. In this thesis members of local fire safe councils, as well as the California Fire Safe Council, reported on the organizational strategies employed by each and how efforts to work together have progressed.

Some strengths that the local, grassroots fire safe councils have demonstrated are the variety of skills that they can draw from volunteers and a strong understanding of the local area, both of which lead to increased social capital and the ability to gain broad-reaching local area support for their projects. Much work has been accomplished and continues to take place in the wildland urban interface because these community volunteers came forward. They are working together, building trust and community

capacity, to accomplish projects on private land to improve community fire safety and preparedness. A weakness of these grassroots groups has been unstable funding and support, and many have benefitted from the development of the grants clearinghouse by the California Fire Safe Council. The creation of a self-appointed centralized authority, the California Fire Safe Council, brings forward some of the strengths that a centralized organization can offer. The stability in funding and legitimacy were mentioned by grassroots fire safe council representatives in interviews. However, differences in the social and ecological environments across the state must be considered when attempting to organize centrally.

Organizational theory focuses on issues of hierarchy and power. The literature framework identifies a weakness of centralized authority in getting their power recognized by the base and a weakness for grassroots organizations in having their power usurped by the state. Many of the interview participants spoke of a fear of losing control of their organization to the centralized California Fire Safe Council.

There is a basic question of the legitimacy of the California Fire Safe Council as a centralized authority for the grassroots fire safe councils. They have created a convenient mechanism for distribution of funds from federal agencies for fire safe community projects, so both the agencies and community groups were enticed to participate, but neither the agencies nor the community groups appointed the California Fire Safe Council as a centralized authority over the grassroots councils. The California Fire Safe Council has made claims about how it serves the grassroots councils, but much of its work seems to be on building itself up as an organization and demanding to be

recognized as the centralized authority through projects such as the fire safe council pilot certification program and seeking to trademark the fire safe council logo. If they truly share the goals of the grassroots fire safe councils, to increase fire safety and preparedness in communities across the state, there needs to be some careful thought put into their organizational strategy and, in order to increase broad-reaching support and tap into the experience and local knowledge available they should seek to include the voices of grassroots fire safe councils.

I hope that this study can be helpful to those interested in or experiencing the overlap of grassroots organizing and centralized authority. Organizational theory has a lot to offer in evaluating and anticipating some of the most typical strengths and pitfalls of each type of organizing. In recognizing the strengths and weaknesses that each type of organizing can bring, and looking at other ways of working together, a more successful merging or cooperative relationship might be possible. Networked governance and loosely coupled systems might offer some insights on structuring. There is a lot to be gained from working together, with benefits like increased information sharing, more efficient use of resources, enhanced learning, and increased capacity to plan for and address complex problems. Unfortunately, since money and legitimacy are more readily given to the centralized authority in most cases, grassroots organizations struggle to gain those very same things without being co-opted or sacrificing the unique characteristics that serve them so well on the ground. Centralized organizations must recognize that community-based solutions are on the rise, especially in the Western U.S. and in natural resource issues, and that they have a unique set of strengths to offer.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge that this is a small study, and of course does not encompass or represent all fire safe councils. More important than finding a definition of what a fire safe council is, or what the “best” approach might be, is to look for ways that the grassroots and centralized organizations can work together, ideally acknowledging and respecting the strengths that each organization can bring and recognizing and overcoming weaknesses. While they do not speak in a unified voice for their cause, the diversity of voices calling themselves fire safe councils is important to recognize. A “one-size-fits-all” approach to organizing coming from a centralized organization is a dangerous assertion of authority and a dismissal of grassroots’ strengths.

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APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is the name of the fire safe council (FSC) you are active in?
2. What is your role in this council?
3. How and why did your FSC start?
4. Who are some of the 'leaders' in your FSC?
5. What are their roles within the FSC and in the community?
6. Does your FSC have any paid employees?
7. If so, for how long has there been paid staff?
8. Where do you get funding for your work?
9. Do you go through the California Fire Safe Council's Grants Clearinghouse?
10. Do you collaborate on projects with others?
11. Do you share information?
12. How is the sharing/collaboration instigated?
13. What are some of the projects your FSC works on?
14. How do you decide which projects to work on?
15. What are some of your FSCs strengths and weaknesses?
16. What is your definition of a Fire Safe Council?
17. What do you see as the role of the California Fire Safe Council?
18. How do you think the California Fire Safe Council's program to 'certify' FSCs will impact FSCs around the state?