



Future of the Forests Partnership Summit – Summary Report

Boulder, Colorado | June 16–18, 2025



Executive Summary

In June 2025, more than 60 leaders from federal, state, Tribal, local, nonprofit, and philanthropic sectors gathered in Boulder, Colorado for an invitation-only summit to address escalating wildfire risk, shifting institutional roles, and evolving funding landscapes. Over two days, participants moved from sense-making to collaborative visioning, generating clear themes, actionable ideas, and shared principles for advancing forest health and community resilience.

There are many changes currently underway in national systems of forest and wildfire management that are creating both immediate needs and long-term opportunities for systemic improvements. Federal restructuring, funding instability, and reduced agency capacity are reshaping wildfire and forest management. The risks include over-prioritizing fire suppression, shifting resources away from preparedness and mitigation, reducing cross-boundary work, and losing institutional knowledge. Yet there are also opportunities in decentralized, locally led solutions, cross-jurisdictional collaboration, and innovative funding approaches that can drive lasting change.

A major theme that emerged from the Summit was workforce development. Attendees called for inclusive, sustainable career pathways—particularly for underrepresented, Tribal, and rural communities—and for addressing wage disparities, housing barriers, burnout, and benefits gaps. Indigenous workforce funding, they emphasized, must flow to Indigenous-led organizations. Retention is as important as recruitment, since experience sustains critical roles. The housing crisis was noted as the most significant barrier to building workforce capacity in the sector.

Funding and financing innovation emerged as another priority. Proposals included creating regional wildfire resilience hubs and establishing a \$300 million revolving loan fund to bridge federal funding delays. Participants urged treating forest and community health as investable public goods, developing better valuation tools for ecosystem services, and reforming fragmented funding streams to align with ecological timelines and outcomes.

Collaborative partnerships and shared stewardship will be essential for progress. Recommendations included elevating local collaboratives, improving the downward flow of federal funds, and addressing bottlenecks in grants, data integration, and staffing turnover. Adaptive management, community accountability, and cross-jurisdictional service delivery should be built into stewardship efforts.

Successful, community-based solutions will require Tribal co-stewardship. Indigenous partnerships require authentic, respectful relationships grounded in sovereignty and cultural understanding. Participants advocated collaborative processes designed to respect sacred knowledge, avoid extractive practices, and ensure proper compensation. They also identified the need to integrate Traditional Ecological Knowledge into operations—not just research—while increasing Indigenous leadership, compensation, and liaison roles, and ensuring outcomes align with Indigenous values.

Technology, innovation, communication, and public trust are also vital. Participants called for mapping and connecting the innovation ecosystem, sharing decision space and risk, and integrating data across sectors. They recommended blending technical modeling with community stories, cultural values, and social science, and applying tools such as AI smoke detection, drones, and StoryMaps for planning and engagement. The wildfire crisis, they agreed, should be framed as a societal challenge that links climate, human health, housing, water, equity, and safety. Messaging should be values-based, emotionally resonant, and free of jargon, equipping local leaders with narratives that normalize beneficial fire and highlight the benefits of proactive investment.

Finally, participants emphasized the importance of a high-functioning Forest Service for shared stewardship. Strengthening grants, agreements, and technical assistance capacity; streamlining processes; and ensuring stable leadership are all critical. Long-term investment in local relationships, transparency, and funding will sustain trust and outcomes, while shared decision-making can empower partners without diminishing agency accountability.



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Background

The Future of the Forest Summit emerged from a profound sense of urgency—a recognition that as federal structures shift, funding landscapes evolve, and the frequency and severity of wildfire increases, there is a critical need for bold collaboration grounded in local relevance and cross-sector trust. While the event was rapidly conceived, the summit leadership team delivered exceptional work, sculpting an agenda that was both adaptive and thoughtful.

In June 2025, over 60 leaders from across the wildfire, forest health, and community resilience sectors convened in Boulder, Colorado, for this invitation-only gathering (see Appendix A). The Summit created a unique and intentional space for federal, state, tribal, local, nonprofit, and philanthropic representatives to reflect, align, and take collective ownership of the current moment.

The goal was not to solve, but to sense-make and explore "this moment" in forest and wildfire management and the changes taking place—forging meaningful pathways forward rooted in shared understanding. We recognize and thank the many individuals working in this space who were not in the room, acknowledging that due to limited time, space, and funding, difficult decisions had to be made about participation.





Workshop Process & Structure

The summit was designed as a thoughtfully designed experience that allowed the discussions to build from sense-making to visioning across two intensive days:

Day 1: Sense Making

- Engaging and focused on thoughtfully building connections
- Ensuring individual perspectives were raised and heard
- Establishing the state of the landscape
- Discussing foundational truths
- Friends of the Forest Service visioning session

Day 2: Collaborative visioning

- Thematic breakout sessions organized around five key areas:
 - Workforce transformation
 - Funding
 - Partnership development and shared stewardship 2.0
 - Technology and Innovation
 - Tribal partnerships



Acknowledgments

Special thanks to the Argosy Foundation for their trust and financial support to make the Summit a reality and to ensure that travel expenses were covered for everyone who needed them.

Thank you to the Leadership Team and COCO Staff:

Meryl Harrell
Madelene McDonald
Sara Baker
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Tony Cheng
Thérèse d'Auria Ryley
Jedidiah Lomax
Eric Isenhardt
Esther Duke
Maria Brandt

...and to all participants who brought their expertise, passion, and commitment to this critical work.

From COCO

I want to start with gratitude. This Summit began as a feeling — a sense of urgency, yes, but also a deep belief that something important could happen if we simply made space. Thanks to the Argosy Foundation, that space became real. And thanks to the incredible Summit Leadership Team — who brought care and commitment to every detail — that space became meaningful. And then you showed up. You made the time, you made the trip, and you brought your full selves to the conversation. For that, I'm deeply grateful.

This wasn't a typical conference. We didn't gather to deliver outcomes tied up with a bow. We came together because something needs to shift — and because we believe that shift can happen through collaboration, not just coordination. Through shared ownership, not just shared interest.

The world is changing. Wildfires are only part of the story. Systems are straining, roles are evolving, and many of the old assumptions are no longer holding. But at the same time, there's growth. There's alignment. There's leadership. There's momentum. I believe our job — now more than ever — is to tell the difference between what needs to be let go and what must be protected. And that starts with listening.

I'll be honest — this has been a hard report to write. Not because of the time it took, but because it's hard to wrap in words what coming together meant — for me, for COCO, and I hope, for you. Something powerful happened in that room. The kind of thing you carry with you long after the name tags come off. It wasn't just the content. It was the care. The honesty. The sense of shared purpose.

Personally, I left the Summit feeling encouraged. Not because we solved anything — we didn't — but because we came together with honesty, humility, and a shared willingness to learn from each other. We listened. We challenged ourselves. We were brave. We gave generously — our ideas, our experiences, our frustrations, and our hopes.

That spirit — of public service, of care, of wanting better for our communities and for the land — was everywhere. And it reminded me that we're not alone in this work. In fact, we're part of something much bigger: a growing network of people who want to do more than react. People who want to shape what's next.

One idea that came through loud and clear was the need for a more intentional way for us to stay connected — a place (virtual or otherwise) to carry forward the energy, insights, and connections sparked here. That may take time to build, but the desire is real. So are the relationships. And that's a solid place to start.

Thanks again for showing up — and for all the ways you'll continue showing up after this.



Jonathan Bruno
Chief Executive Office | Coalitions & Collaboratives (COCO)



Meeting the Moment

The workshop began with breakout discussions about participants' perceptions of changes underway in national systems of forest and wildfire management. These disruptions are creating both immediate needs and long-term opportunities for improvements to the system.

Below are a few key themes that emerged:

- A sense of urgency, alongside cuts to the workforce and loss of capacity, are causing anxiety, grief, and burnout for many, as well as a loss of institutional knowledge and brain drain as seasoned professionals and career public servants retire or move on to other sectors. There is a call to action to retain good people in our networks, maintain pride in our work, and build the next generation of capacity and leadership.
- Recent policy changes compel federal land agencies to prioritize wildfire suppression and timber production on federal lands, and potentially excluding priorities co-developed by numerous partners over many years.
- Declining federal agency capacity and funding are affecting the ability to collaborate authentically and meet commitments to long-standing partners. In particular, leadership of Tribes, state and local governments, and community-connected partners will be critical in holding the federal government accountable to trust responsibility to ensure lands are effectively managed.
- Narrowing of federal land agencies' priorities and capacity potentially shift burdens and responsibilities to state and local governments, but without the corresponding financial resources.
- Local government, nongovernment entities, and community-based organizations will need to maintain or expand collaborative capacity even as they are stepping up core cross-boundary work.
- As organizations scramble to diversify funding, there are no clear answers to questions like "who will pay for what?" There is growing interest in conservation finance and alternative market development, and a push for more creative funding models.
- Impending cuts to U.S. Forest Service Research & Development threaten to erode the foundation of scientific knowledge and data systems necessary to inform decision-making. On the other hand, shifting science priorities may offer opportunities to address tensions between traditional Western academic research and Indigenous knowledge, traditional ecological knowledge, and local experiential knowledge.

While these changes are still unfolding and the dust has not yet settled, some things remain the same. Workshop participants surfaced several shared principles that serve as touchpoints in future conversations:

- Fire is inevitable, but disaster is not.
- Forest health and community well-being are interdependent.
- Trust remains foundational: collaboration moves at the speed of trust.
- Localized solutions and leadership must be centered, especially as federal capacity wanes.
- Inclusive, equitable representation and Tribal co-stewardship are not optional.



Systemic Shifts to Embrace



Solution Sourcing

Participants surfaced a powerful suite of actionable ideas and systemic shifts necessary to advance forest and community resilience in the face of escalating wildfire risk, institutional disruption, and cultural change.

In the following sections, we summarize insights generated through the Solutions Sourcing exercises on Day 2 and incorporate related ideas that came out of other Summit sessions. These summaries are organized thematically around Workforce, Funding & Financing Innovations, Partnership Development & Shared Stewardship 2.0, Indigenous Partnerships, Technology & Innovation/ Communications & Public Trust, and Friends of the Forest Service. Each section includes high-level bullet points capturing the “Big Ideas” or takeaways for each theme, followed by discussion elaborating these ideas. Together, these themes reflect a collective call for transformation sourced from the summit participants.

Workforce

A strong and sustainable workforce is the backbone of forest and wildfire management. Without a well-supported, well-trained, and retained workforce, progress in mitigation, resilience, and recovery efforts is undermined

Big Ideas

- Address systemic barriers such as wage disparities, housing insecurity, and lack of benefits—especially for fire-adjacent roles like mitigation specialists, youth corps members, and prescribed burn practitioners.
- Scale local workforce development pathways, particularly those that serve underrepresented, Tribal, and rural communities. This includes training, career continuity mechanisms, and quality-of-life investments.
- Create career pipelines that are tied to ecological outcomes and long-term community investment. Explore multi-agency agreements that enable flexible staffing, retention, and mental health support.

Discussion

Workforce development was a key value and priority for many participants at the Summit. The Workforce Solutions Sourcing breakout focused on designing sustainable and inclusive workforce pathways across the wildfire and forest resilience sectors. Participants emphasized the need to build continuity between training, employment, and leadership.

There was clear recognition of barriers to workforce retention—including pay disparities, lack of secure benefits, burnout, unsupportive working environments, insufficient funding, and limited access to housing. For example, breakout group participants noted the wage disparities between fire roles and non-fire natural resources roles, the former role being better compensated. Despite this existing disparity, participants identified a trend of increasing fire role wages without commensurate increases for non-fire forestry roles that are also critical. This was emphasized by participants, who expressed frustration with frequent advocacy for increasing firefighter wages, when their inability to increase wages for other critical roles (like facilities maintenance), led to staffing challenges.

Participants highlighted the importance of employment opportunities that met quality-of-life needs, including stable housing, benefits, and career advancement. It was noted in particular that the housing crisis not only poses a significant barrier to entry into critical jobs in fire and other related fields, but that also poses a significant barrier to retention of these roles. The housing crisis was noted as the most significant barrier to building workforce capacity in the sector.

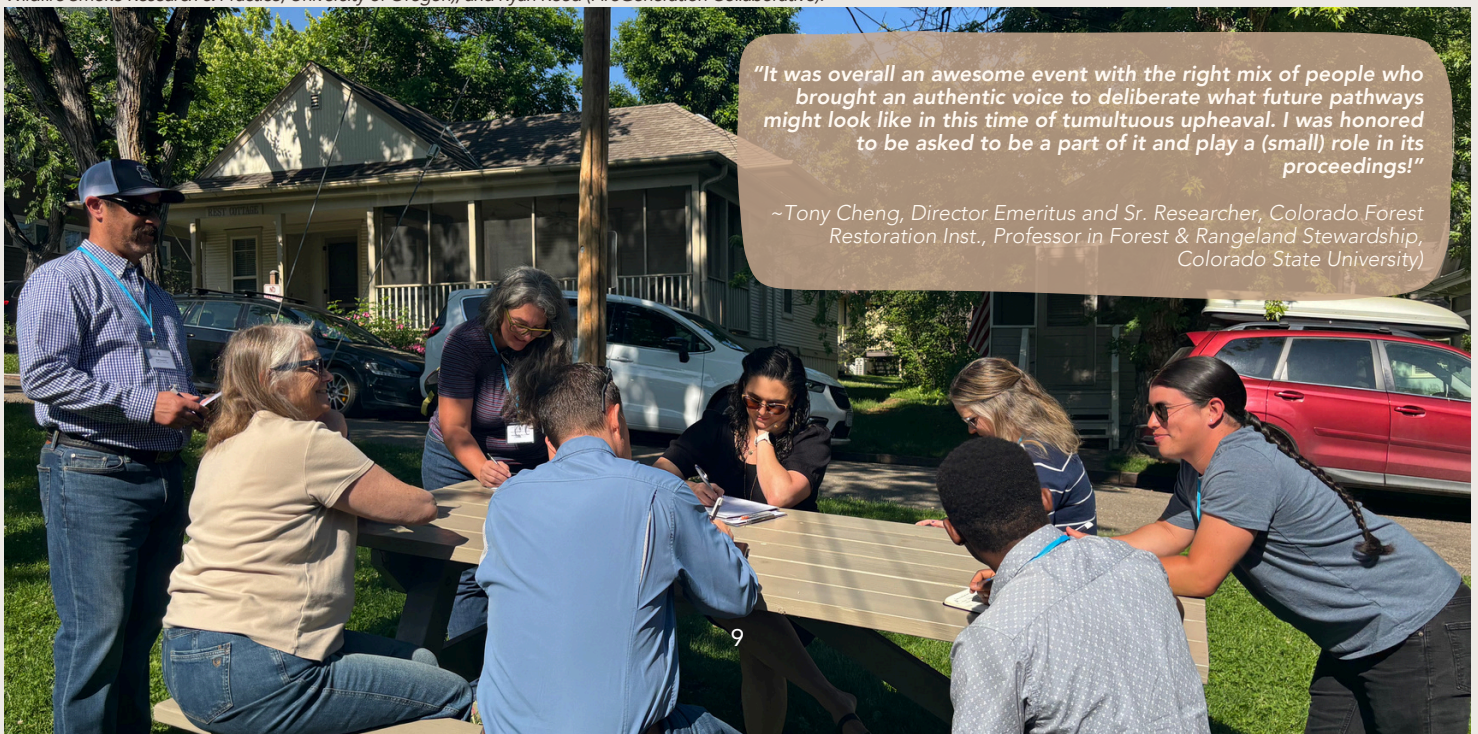
Participants noted the need to ensure that funding for Indigenous workforce development programming goes to Tribes and Indigenous-led efforts, meaning 51+% of the organization's C-Suite and 51+% of conservation /or resource organization's Board of Directors are composed of Tribal citizens and other Indigenous-identifying individuals. This is a standard recommendation for many Indigenous workforce development guidance.

A significant area of need discussed is incident command roles. The participants shared that the lack of retention in the wildfire workforce has a secondary impact on the low numbers of incident command personnel. Retention is critical: while training is valuable, experience is crucial for strong incident command skills and cannot be developed through training alone.

Participants emphasized the need to broaden the understanding of workforce capacity beyond economic impacts, recognizing the importance of supporting employees' families and lifeways, particularly with regard to Indigenous cultural practices as cultural burning.

Additionally, there is a clear need for innovative mechanisms—such as collaborative agreements, taskforces, and diversified funding—to ensure long-term workforce sustainability.

Pictured left to right: Neil Chapman (Flagstaff Fire Department), Carol Ekarius (Coalitions & Collaboratives), Michelle Medley-Daniel (The Watershed Center), Ben Guillon (Conservation Investment Management), Amber Ortega (U.S. Forest Service), Jedidiah Lomax (Coalitions & Collaboratives), Heidi Huber-Stearns (Institute for a Sustainable Environment & Center for Wildfire Smoke Research & Practice, University of Oregon), and Ryan Reed (FireGeneration Collaborative).





Funding & Financing Innovation

Big Ideas

- Launch pilot Regional Wildfire Resilience Hubs to anchor planning, implementation, and cross-sector collaboration. These hubs would serve as strategic centers for grant writing, workforce coordination, vulnerability assessments, and on-the-ground mitigation.
- Establish a \$300M flexible bridge fund to provide low-interest, revolving loans for community resilience, forest restoration, and home hardening. This would help address funding gaps created by federal delays or downturns.
- Unlock private capital by positioning forest and community health as investable public goods. Explore mechanisms like performance-based funding, ratepayer models, insurance-integrated incentives, and environmental markets.
- Innovate around general operations, recognizing that stable, unrestricted funding is vital for maintaining partner capacity and continuity—especially during federal funding shortfalls.
- Reform fragmented funding streams to enable strategic, landscape-scale planning and streamlined implementation. Align funding timelines with ecosystem realities.

Discussion

This session surfaced urgent questions around:

- The future of funding and financing forest health projects.
- The role of federal, state, local, philanthropic, and other funding streams.

Participants voted on a set of proposals. Those receiving the most votes included establishing regional wildfire resilience collaboration hubs to strengthen coordination and capacity across communities, creating a \$300M revolving loan fund to support forest restoration and home hardening, developing a public benefits valuation framework to capture the ecological, economic, and social value of forests, and pursuing local ballot initiatives to secure sustainable funding for cooperative community risk reduction.

Much of the conversation among experts leaned into creating more transparency and value of the public benefits that flow from all forests. All breakout participants wanted to see our sector create the marketplace needed to gain more diverse investment in managing our forests, and emphasized that developing models to clearly value the public benefits forests provide could give Congress, financiers, and beneficiaries the “why” for investing. These ideas reflect a strong desire for adaptable, scalable, and transparent financial tools.

Other big ideas that surfaced during the solution sourcing breakout reflected participants’ ambition to think boldly about structural change. Suggestions included supporting and mandating insurance recognition of mitigation efforts and requiring all citizens to contribute to the maintenance of public lands and ecosystems in proportion to their income. Participants also raised the importance of clarifying agency authority to reimburse or partially reimburse partner debt, as well as creating a universally accepted valuation method for ecosystem services that incorporates cultural, emotional, and intrinsic values alongside economic benefits and avoided costs. To create greater flexibility and efficiency, participants proposed directing federal funds through states to support the implementation of state forest action plans, enabling prioritization across programs and more adaptable grants to communities, with accountability tied to outcomes. Finally, there was a call for stronger accountability mechanisms to ensure progress toward the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, a UN plan adopted in 2015 by 193 member countries, including the United States, setting out 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with 169 targets to achieve by 2030.

Burning questions included: How do we value what hasn’t happened? What is the role of insurance? How do we equitably allocate funding across communities with varying capacities?

Stronger links between philanthropic seed capital and state-led programs, as well as better alignment of funding structures with desired long-term outcomes, were identified as key enabling factors to make progress on this theme.

Partnership Development & Shared Stewardship 2.0

Big Ideas

- In a future with diminished federal capacity, state and local governments, forest collaboratives, and community-based organizations will play a more prominent role in getting work done on the ground.
- An expanded and strengthened use of partnerships to achieve public service objectives will necessitate expanded resources, streamlined resource-sharing procedures, and strengthened commitment to cultivating and sustaining long-term relationships. This requires addressing bottlenecks that impede effective and transparent resource allocation, increasing the readiness of local partnerships and CBOs to receive and deploy resources to have the greatest impact, and instituting efficient accountability mechanisms.
- A functional Forest Service will be needed to sustain consistent public service delivery at the federal level while increasingly relying on partnerships to achieve public service outcomes, maintain or develop mechanisms that are scalable and adaptable to local conditions. Institutionalize replicable mechanisms that support resilient partnerships that can weather change and outlast turnover of individuals and key champions

Discussion

The themes of partnerships, collaboration, and shared stewardship were woven throughout the Summit. While it is not yet clear how much federal capacity will remain once the shake-up subsides, participants agreed that state and local governments, Tribes, forest collaboratives, and community-based organizations (CBOs) will need to absorb new functions and responsibilities for cross-jurisdictional public service delivery. This will require more people, more resources, more coordination, and better mechanisms for delivering resources to where they are needed most.

Participants identified existing bottlenecks in the institutions that guide partnerships for the U.S. Forest Service and other agencies, such as: a) slow and complex grants and agreements (G&A) processes; b) limited systems for data integration and adaptive management; c) staff turnover and short-term details that disrupt partner relationships, and d) lack of financial transparency. Participants stressed the importance of reforming fragmented funding streams to enable strategic, landscape-scale planning, streamline implementation, and align funding timelines with ecological realities. Stronger mechanisms for downward allocation of federal funds—modeled after block grants or programs like NRCS-EQIP—would allow funding to flow more directly and equitably to local partners.

Investments in capacity and human resources will be needed to ensure that partnerships and CBOs are ready to receive and allocate resources to implement the highest impact projects and make the most of limited resources to achieve shared management objectives. Decades of learning-by-doing and research can be compiled to inform and improve how partners work together throughout the adaptive management cycle to assess conditions, co-develop targeted strategies, coordinate implementation, learn from management outcomes, and calibrate future actions.

Participants emphasized funding and training for CBOs, who are often closest to the work and have trust built with local communities; they can be powerful catalysts, particularly when connected to increase the scale of their impact. Another recommendation was to invest in community wildfire resilience hubs that blend technical expertise, local knowledge, and implementation capacity.

Reduced federal capacity and increased reliance on regional and local partners will make stable and consistent delivery of public services more challenging. Uncertainty remains over whether and how regulatory compliance work such as contracting, completing, monitoring, and enforcing will be delegated. In the meantime, summit participants recommended that federal partners identify and retain those mechanisms that scale well while allowing for local customization. Examples include, but are not limited to:

- Expand flexible collaborative structures like the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP), which has demonstrated the ability to deliver results at scale, to strengthen partner-driven adaptive management and improve accountability.
- Increase third-party National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) involvement by forest collaboratives, community-based partners, and local consultants with deep knowledge of local ecology. Expand the use of conditions-based NEPA to account for local variations while integrating accountability, monitoring, and adaptive management.
- Incorporating Potential Operational Delineations (PODs) and landscape-scale risk assessments into Community Wildfire Protection Planning (CWPP) processes, locally led wildland fire response and management, and outcomes monitoring.

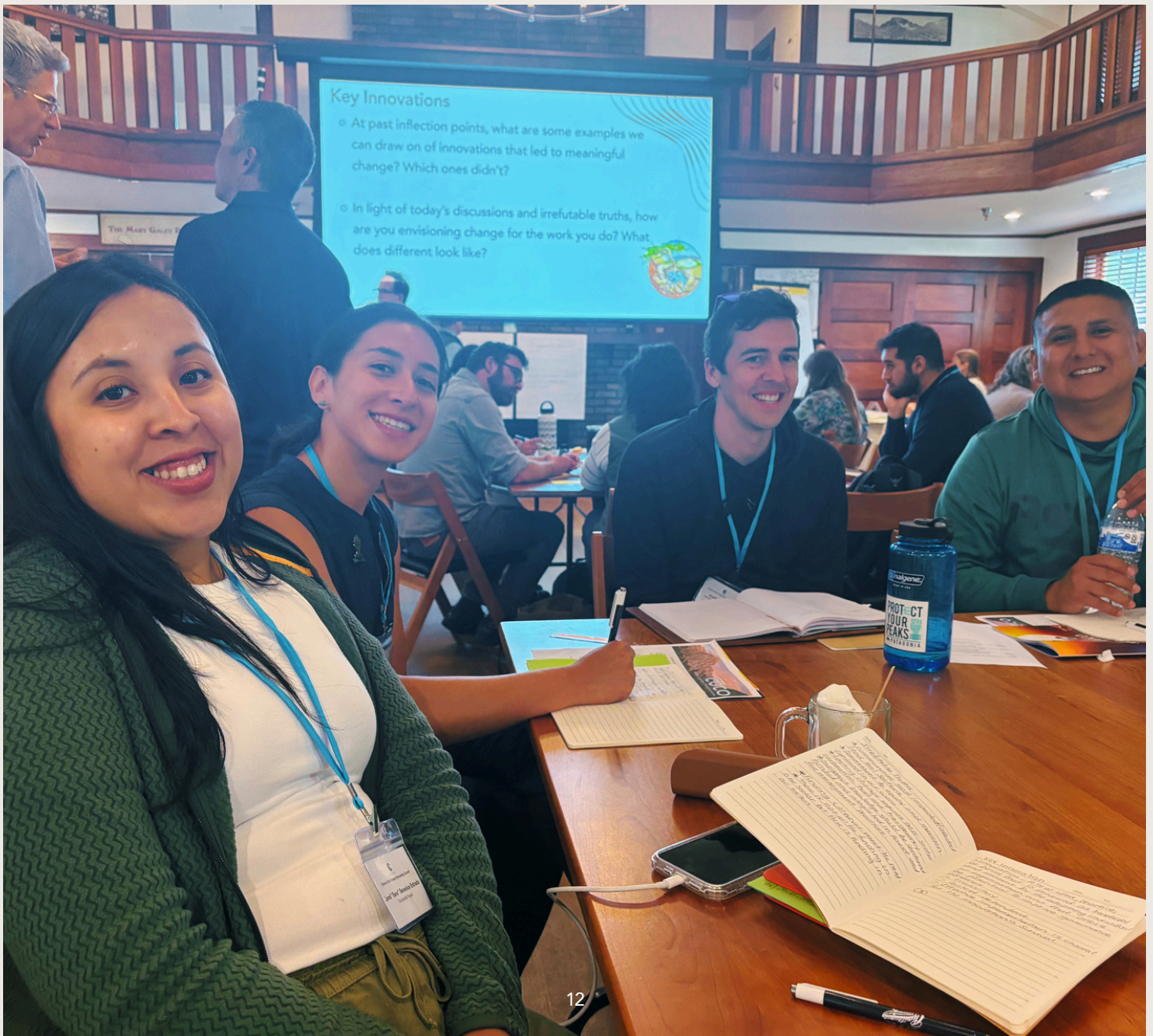
Many questions remain for future dialogue. Prescribed and proactive fire are essential tools for increasing the pace and scale of solutions, yet significant challenges persist—particularly in a reduced federal capacity context. These include risk-sharing dynamics, shifting liability, and limits on non-federal partners' ability to shoulder the risks of using fire.

The shifting balance of power across jurisdictional scales has implications for partnerships and the future of shared stewardship that are still unfolding. In times of crisis, however, people care more about action than jurisdiction and will expect visible, responsive service delivery; participants emphasize that this should remain a priority from cross-agency and multi-jurisdictional partnerships. Reliable and replicable programs like those offered CFLRP could be institutionalized to support more stable, long-term partnerships that can weather change and outlast turnover of key individuals.

Indigenous Partnerships

Big Ideas

- Build authentic, respectful partnerships with Tribal nations by deepening understanding of their history, sovereignty, and contemporary realities, and by hiring, funding, and empowering Indigenous staff and liaisons to strengthen trust and translate between knowledge systems.
- Integrate Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) into practice—both research and operational work—ensuring methods are applied in the field, sacred knowledge is respected, and measurable outcomes align with Indigenous values.
- Bridge systems and processes by using boundary-spanning organizations, creating liaison positions, and designing collaborative structures that reconcile differing expectations, timelines, and approaches between TEK and Western science.
- Promote cultural awareness and education around both cultural and prescribed fire, recognizing their place in a broader continuum of practices that create fire-adapted forests and ecosystems.
- Align funding and programs with Tribal priorities by engaging funders early, drawing on existing programs like Wood for Life and Institute for Tribal Environmental Professionals (ITEP), and ensuring compensation, reciprocity, and culturally appropriate practices are central to support.





"It was encouraging to hear the perspectives in support of national forests and to hear from those who are interested in and invested in being a part of the solutions needed. The broad range of perspectives working in support of the solutions is important to have. Great job bringing together a diverse group of people and backgrounds (funders, high-tier decision makers, project implementers, and other community-level leaders) for this event."

~Anonymous Summit Participant

Discussion

Authentic engagement with Tribal nations requires humility, transparency, and a willingness to work on their terms.

The Indigenous Partnerships breakout examined how federal, state, and nonprofit actors can better support Indigenous-led efforts and integrate Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) into policy, planning, and implementation.

Discussions highlighted the importance of creating liaison roles, honoring Indigenous sovereignty, increasing compensation for Tribal expertise, and ensuring that monitoring and reporting systems respect cultural traditions. The group surfaced the need for an internal deep dive within organizations to ensure respectful and reciprocal engagement with Tribes.

Action ideas included engaging ITEP interns, co-developing culturally appropriate metrics, and improving understanding of how cultural, prescribed, and ecological burns work in concert.

Summit conversations revealed both a curiosity and a lack of clarity around working with Tribal communities. Many practitioners acknowledged gaps in understanding—ranging from the role and level of assistance Tribes seek, to how to integrate TEK with Western science, to how to navigate the deep and often painful history between Indigenous peoples and institutions such as universities and agencies.

Tribal and Western approaches often operate on different time scales, use different measures of success, and carry distinct cultural and spiritual foundations. For example, Western science often demands linear monitoring and reporting systems, while TEK may be expressed through oral histories, traditional land practices, or even cultural artifacts. This raises important questions: Would a piece of pottery depicting an environmental change be considered valid reporting by a funder or agency? How can monitoring frameworks adapt to recognize and honor Indigenous forms of knowledge transmission?

Participants also emphasized the importance of aligning outcomes with Indigenous perspectives on restoration. For some Tribes, a core measure of success is asking: Could I survive in this landscape with just the natural resources available? This holistic lens challenges Western approaches to “measurable deliverables” and invites deeper reflection on long-term resilience.

Technology & Innovation | Communication & Public Trust

Big Ideas

- Invest in strategic communication tools to build broader public understanding of forest health, fire ecology, and mitigation benefits.
- Avoid technical jargon and design messaging that is accessible, emotional, and values-based.
- Equip local leaders with talking points, visuals, and story-based tools to share complex realities in ways that resonate with their communities.

Discussion

Tech and Innovation:

Participants in this group discussed how innovation can be scaled through strategic risk-sharing, clear definitions, and data integration. The group called for mapping the innovation ecosystem to identify silos, connectors, and enabling conditions. Highlighted examples included AI-assisted smoke detection, drone integration, conservation finance tools, and ArcGIS StoryMaps for community engagement.

The group emphasized the need to integrate soft data—community stories, cultural values, and social science—with traditional modeling to drive investment and community support.

Communication and Public Trust:

Summit participants pushed for building a unifying meta-narrative that links climate, health, housing, water, equity, and wildfire resilience, because the wildfire crisis is not just an environmental issue—it's a cross-cutting societal challenge. Participants talked about centering messaging around shared values that resonate across political and cultural divides, such as safety, beauty, clean water, local control, and economic stability. They also talked about the need to promote the idea that fire is a solution, not just a threat, and normalize beneficial fire in public discourse. Overall, it was agreed that there is a need for our community of practice to do a better job of integrating strategic communication into the work that we do. We need to engage marketing professionals to advance storytelling infrastructure and effectively communicate avoided costs, health co-benefits, and the value of proactive investment—through both data and emotionally compelling narratives. The organizers acknowledged that future convenings should include select marketing and communications experts among the list of invitees in order to more fully build out this theme.

"I greatly enjoyed the opportunities to meet with other people and the breakout sessions. I liked the small table exercises and great facilitation!"

*~Kimiko Barrett, Sr. Wildfire Researcher & Policy Analyst,
Headwaters Economics*



Pictured left to right: John Nordgren (The Climate Resilience Fund), Jonathan Paklaian (Arkansas River Watershed Collaborative), Ana Olaya (Uncaged Impact), and Sacha Spector. (Uncaged Impact).

Friends of the Forest Service

Big Ideas

- A high-functioning Forest Service is foundational to collaborative land management. Reliable delivery of core programs – from recreation access to fire management – is essential for public trust and partner engagement.
- Relationships, transparency, and consistency matter as much as technical expertise. Building and maintaining strong ties with communities, Tribes, and partners requires predictable leadership, clear communication, and respect for local context.
- Grants, agreements, and technical support are key levers for impact. The Forest Service’s ability to fund, equip, and advise partners determines the scale and success of shared stewardship efforts.
- Structural change is needed to improve effectiveness. Streamlined processes, reduced turnover, stronger community connections, and a shift away from “up and out” career paths toward local grounding will help sustain results.
- Shared power requires intentional design. Clear roles, equitable access to resources, and mechanisms for long-term collaboration enable the Forest Service and partners to lead together.

Discussion

The Forest Service plays a central role in stewarding public lands, watersheds, forests, and fire-prone landscapes. Communities and partners depend on it for funding, recreation access, forest restoration, fire suppression and integration, law enforcement, wood and water supply, and reliable technical guidance. The agency’s convening capacity, compliance oversight, and delivery of forest science form the backbone of collaborative conservation.

Partners emphasized the importance of grants and agreements as a primary means of enabling local organizations to act. A high-capacity contracting and G&A system—paired with consistent technical support—allows projects to move from planning to implementation efficiently. Investments in applied science, such as the Forest Inventory and Analysis program, and active community engagement (including language access) ensure decisions are informed and inclusive.

To be effective, the Forest Service must maintain core operational stability: adequate field-based staffing, nimbleness in emergency response, and the ability to uphold legal and trust responsibilities, especially with Tribal Nations. Reliable leadership transitions and a “no surprises” culture help sustain trust with partners.

At the same time, structural and cultural changes are needed. Summit participants called for:

- Streamlined hiring and decentralized decision-making.
- A centralized, accessible grants portal (similar to Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) to reduce barriers for low-capacity organizations.
- Greater transparency in finances and operations.
- Consistency in policies and processes across regions, with flexibility for local adaptation.
- Long-term funding commitments to support continuity and avoid the disruption caused by leadership changes or shifting priorities.

Partnerships can be strengthened by adopting shared decision-making models and empowering boundary-spanning roles. The agency could play a stronger convening role, connecting community partners, conservation organizations, and interagency collaborators to compare practices, coordinate planning, and respond to climate-driven challenges. Examples like the 2-3-2 Partnership in Southern Colorado and Northern New Mexico show how local collaboration can increase capacity without the Forest Service ceding its stake in land management.

Sharing power and responsibility also means clarifying roles, ensuring equitable inclusion, and supporting low-capacity and frontline communities disproportionately affected by the climate crisis. A third-party liaison entity, stronger memoranda of understanding, and expanded collaborative governance structures could help achieve this balance.

Ultimately, an effective and fully funded Forest Service—grounded in local relationships, equipped with strong technical and financial tools, and committed to transparent, consistent collaboration—can meet the demands of modern forest management while honoring its mission and responsibilities.

Conclusion

How do you write a conclusion when the Summit, the conversations, the relationships, the sense-making, and the work have only just begun? Simply put, this report is not an ending — it's a launching point.

We began with gratitude for the space created, the leadership that guided us, and for every one of you who showed up with honesty, care, and commitment. This wasn't a typical conference. It was a call to shift from coordination to true collaboration, from shared interest to shared ownership.

The themes we explored — Workforce Development, Funding & Finance, Shared Stewardship, Indigenous Partnerships, and Technology & Innovation — reflect questions, bold ideas, and the groundwork for progress. These are signals, not solutions, pointing toward the possibilities ahead. And yet, in each of these themes are numerous actionable items and next steps. Some are big, complex, and will take many months if not years to realize. Others, however, can be taken up and run with in short order.

Now, more than ever, trust and relationships are our foundation. As Steven Covey so aptly states "Collaboration moves at the speed of trust", and cross-jurisdictional partnerships are essential to navigate the complex challenges we face.

The momentum we sparked together must be sustained. The call to action is clear: stay connected, keep listening, keep learning, and keep showing up. Together, we will shape what's next — not alone, but as a growing network committed to lasting change.

"Thank you to the COCO team for organizing this Summit! You all did a wonderful job of organizing and making it a collaborative and productive space for processing this moment with other thoughtful leaders."

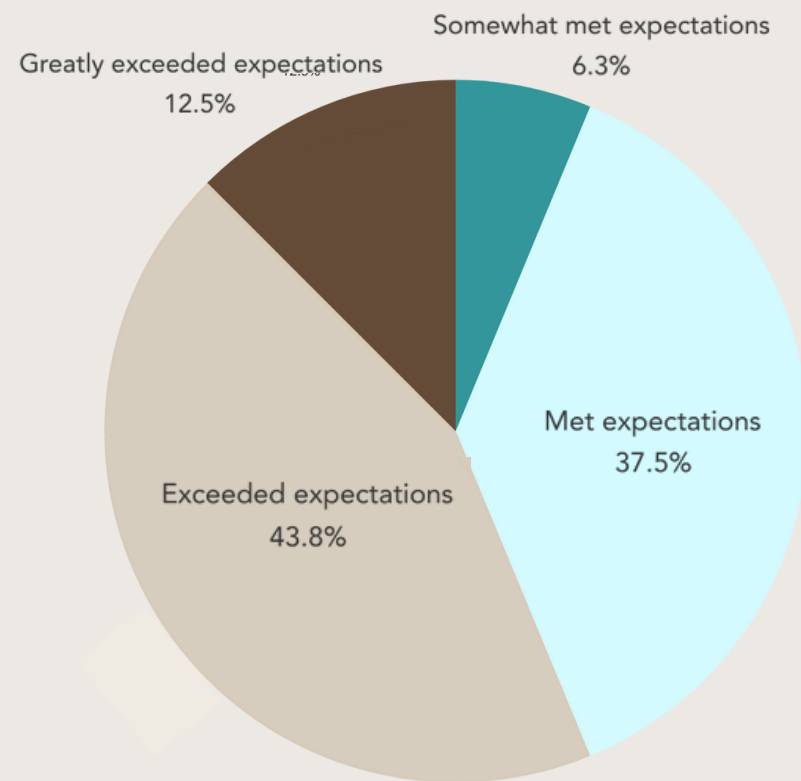
*~Reed Van Beveren, Deputy Director/Technology,
Environmental Policy Innovation Center*

Appendix A: Organizations & Agencies Represented at the 2025 FoF Summit

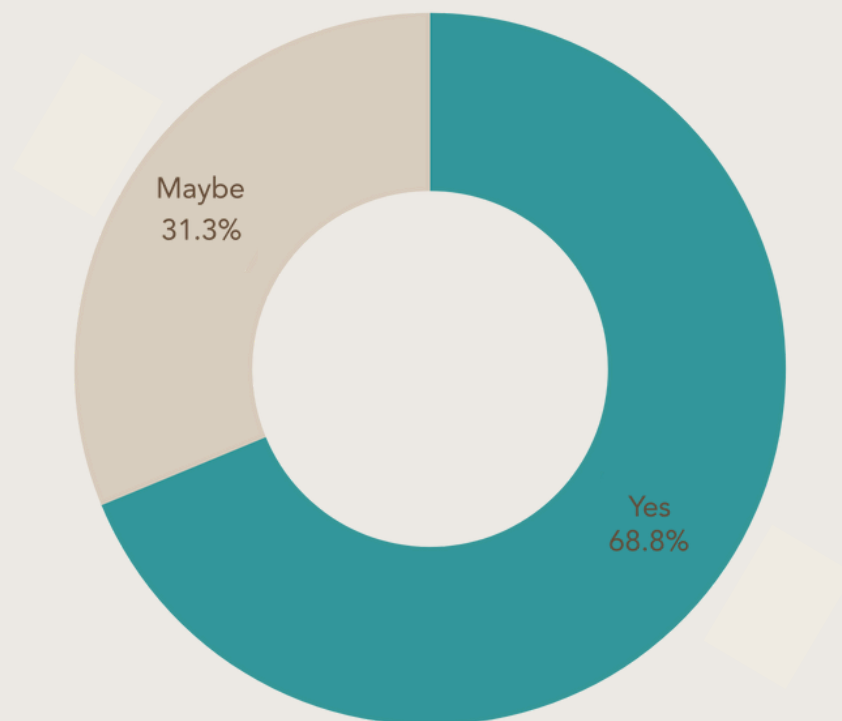
Alliance for Wildfire Resilience	Forest Stewards Guild	Trees, Water, People
Arkansas River Watershed Collaborative	Gates Family Foundation	Trust for Public Land
Blue Forest	Headwaters Economics	U.S. Department of Agriculture
Bureau of Land Management	Institute for a Sustainable Environment & Center for Wildfire Smoke Research & Practice, University of Oregon	U.S. Forest Service
Clear Creek Watershed and Forest Health Partnership	National Forest Foundation	Uncaged Impact
Coconino County	Native American Advancement Corp	United Way of Missoula
Colorado Forest Restoration Institute	Network for Landscape Conservation	Upper South Platte Partnership
Colorado State Forest Service	Silvix Resources	Walton Family Foundation
Colorado State University	Southwest Ecological Restoration Institute	Western Forestry Leadership Coalition
Conservation Finance Network	Sustainable Northwest	Western Governors Association
Conservation Investment Management	The Climate Resilience Fund	Wyoming State Forestry Division
Denver Water	The Nature Conservancy	Zup Co., Inc.
Doris Duke Foundation	The Pew Charitable Trusts	
Environmental Policy Innovation Center	The Semilla Project	
FireGeneration Collaborative	The Watershed Center	
Flagstaff Fire Department	The Wilderness Society	

Appendix B: Participant Survey Results

What did you think of the Future of the Forests Partnership Summit?



If we were to host another Summit, would you attend?





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