Chapter 2 - Community Profile

This plan addresses wildfire and wildfire smoke risk across the entirety of Multnomah County.

Multnomah County is located in northwestern Oregon, bounded by the Columbia River to the north, Washington and Columbia Counties on the west and northwest and Hood River and Clackamas Counties to the east and southeast. The county is the smallest in Oregon by area, but has, by far, the largest population in the state. This high population density has significant implications for wildfire and wildfire smoke risk. Multnomah County also has the highest total numbers of residents in the state who face barriers to resilience from these disasters.

2.1 Population Characteristics

The population of Multnomah County grew by approximately 80,000 people between the 2010 and 2020 United States censuses. Nearly all of the population growth in the county occurred in incorporated cities, but this still reflects a large increase in residents at risk from wildfire. City growth has occurred via denser urban cores, at the edges of incorporated limits, and through annexation of rural unincorporated areas.

Population is heavily concentrated in the center of the county, leaving large areas with low population density on the eastern and western reaches, but significant numbers of people still live in those areas, apart from large tracts of public land and privately owned timberlands.

Interactive version of this map – (Planning and Cadastral - Estimated Housing Density)[15]

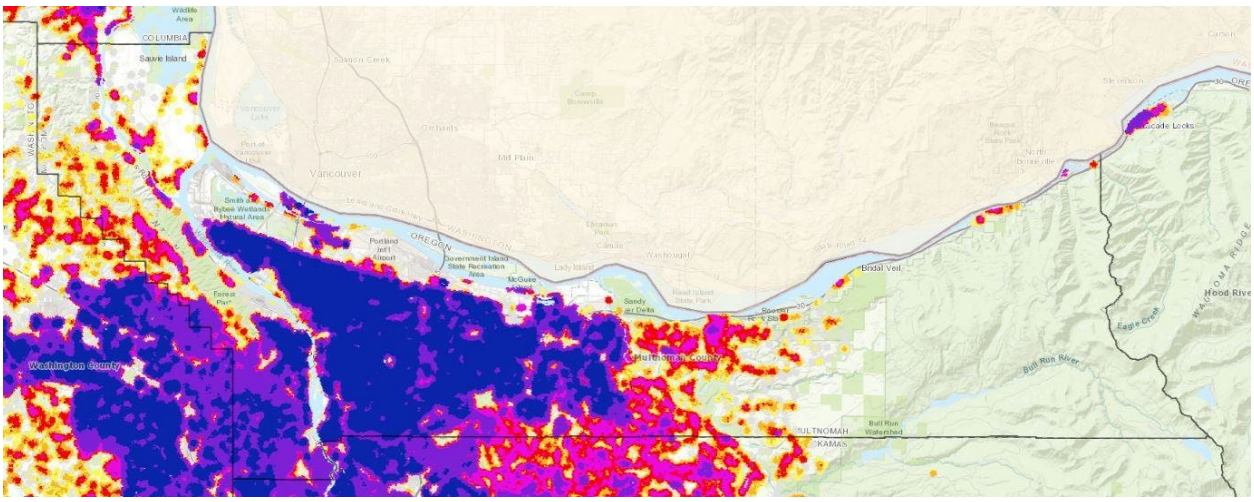

Figure 5 - Population density in Multnomah County. Map hosted at the Oregon Wildfire Explorer, with data from the 2013 West Wide Wildfire Assessment. Darker colored areas have the highest population density, and areas with less than one house per 40 acres are shown with no color.

As risk from wildfire smoke impacts the entire population, the county's population growth represents a significant increase in vulnerability to public health impacts.

[15] When maps from the Oregon Wildfire Explorer are used, the map layers are identified to help readers navigate the website. Map layers at the site can be zoomed and can be searched by address.

2.1.1 Residents at Disproportionate Risk from Wildfire and Wildfire Smoke

In the ten-year span between the last two federal censuses, the county has seen an especially significant increase in its proportion of older adults, who are identified as a population group at higher risk from wildfire smoke. Older adults may also have barriers to accessing certain types of alerts and communication and are more likely to have mobility limitations that may make evacuation or property maintenance for wildfire risk more difficult.

Multnomah County also continues to become more racially and linguistically diverse, with increases in non-white populations and populations who speak English less than very well. The Hispanic/Latino population is projected to be the fastest growing group over the next 40 years[16], indicating a need for continuing collaboration with community organizations serving this population and multi-lingual resources and outreach focused on reducing risk from wildfire and wildfire smoke.

Census statistics indicate that the population in most wildfire prone unincorporated locations such as Forest Park/West Hills, east of the Sandy River, and in the Columbia River Gorge are more likely to be older and less likely to live in poverty, be non-white, or speak a language other than English at home. Census-tract level data is often too broad, especially in rural tracts, to effectively plan for pockets of vulnerability such as group homes, renters, migrant workers, and those with mobility limitations. When risk reduction efforts are extended to all Wildland Urban Interface areas, locations on the edges of cities and near large city parks that could see wildfire risk may change the demographics at risk and are in need of further study.

Unhoused Residents

County residents living without shelter are among the most at risk from both wildfire and wildfire smoke. A Point In Time census is conducted roughly every two years, and the 2022 count found 3,057 unsheltered residents in Multnomah County —an increase of 50% since 2019[17].

Unsheltered residents have less access to cleaner air spaces and less ability to protect themselves from unhealthy air where they live. Provision of emergency cleaner air spaces and respiratory masks have been used to support public health during recent wildfire smoke events. Results from the 2022 count also indicate that 60% of unsheltered residents have one or more disabilities, a much higher rate than the housed population – including about 25% with a physical disability and about 25% with a chronic health condition[18]. Unsheltered residents are also disproportionately likely to be Black/African-American or American Indian/Alaska Native, groups already more likely to suffer from major chronic illnesses, including asthma[19].

The 2022 count found that about 10% of unsheltered residents were living in woods or open space. Unsheltered residents living in woods or open space are at high risk from wildfire, living in areas bounded by fire fuels, having barriers to receiving alerts and warnings, and living in locations that may be hidden from view of emergency responders. Other disabilities disproportionately held in the unsheltered community, such as hearing or vision limitations and developmental disabilities, may also create barriers to emergency alerting and evacuation.

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[16] 2060 growth forecast, Metro, April 30, 2016
[17] All data in this section comes from the 2022 Multnomah County Point in Time Count - Report available here
[18] Respondents could choose multiple answers for disability type, so these two numbers may count the same people in many cases.
[19] Current Asthma Demographics, American Lung Association

Camping in woods or open space also creates wildfire risk, with unsheltered residents relying on open fires for cooking or warming. Campsites have blocked firefighter access in some cases, increasing the risk of a wildfire escaping control. The Joint Office of Homeless Services believes that the number of people camping in woods or open space is likely significantly higher than recorded by the Point in Time count, due to the difficulty of locating or accessing campsites in undeveloped areas and parklands during census counts.

2.2 Land Ownership

The eastern side of Multnomah County has a high percentage of public lands, due to Forest Service Units, Bureau of Land Management properties, Columbia River Gorge parks, local parks, and the Bull Run Watershed. The area also includes large privately held timber tracts. This creates coordination challenges as well as opportunities for mutual support and resource sharing in addressing wildfire risk.

Interactive version of this map – (Administrative Boundaries - Land Management/Ownership)

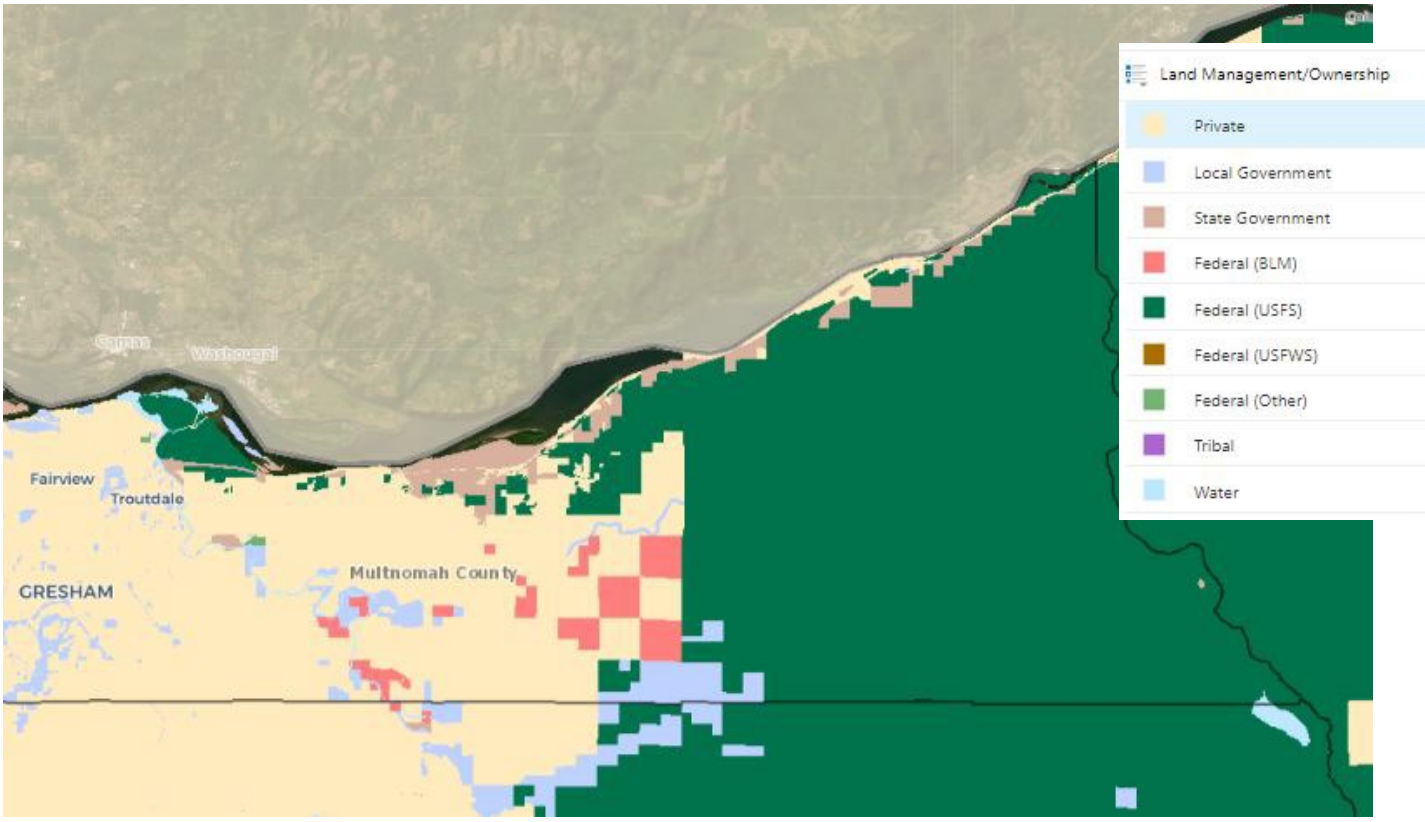


Figure 6 - Land management/ownership in eastern Multnomah County. Map hosted by the Oregon Wildfire Explorer, data from Bureau of Land Management (2015)

The west side of Multnomah County has much less public land, but includes 5,200-acre Forest Park (one of the largest urban forests in the United States), the Sauvie Island State Wildlife Area and timber holdings and BLM properties in the northwest corner.

Public lands in central portions of the county are primarily local and regional parks, but also include Tryon Creek State Natural Area (the only Oregon state park located in a major metropolitan area) at the boundary with Clackamas County.

Interactive version of this map – (Administrative Boundaries - Land Management/Ownership)

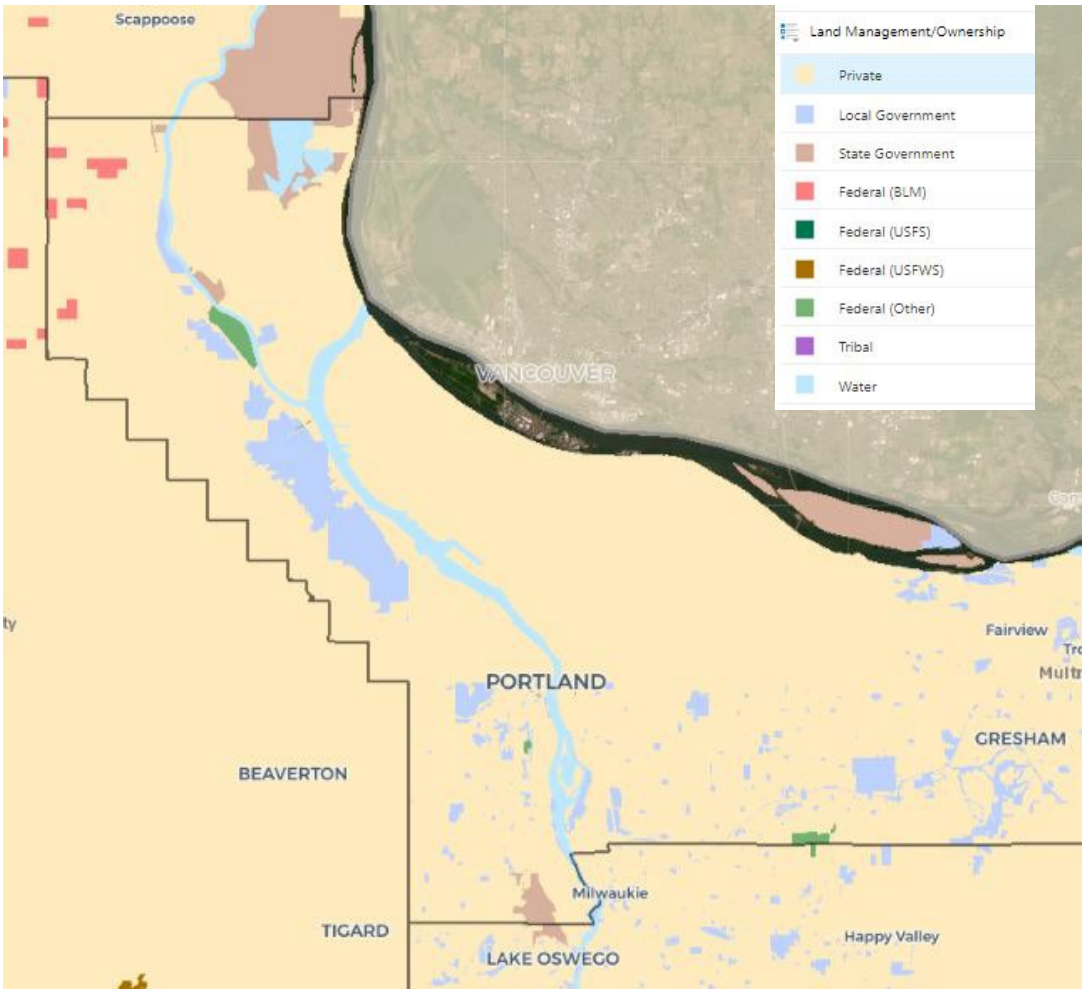


Figure 7 Land management/ownership in western Multnomah County. Map hosted by the Oregon Wildfire Explorer, data from Bureau of Land Management (2015)

2.3 Future Development

Like all urbanized areas of Oregon, the Portland Metropolitan Area has an Urban Growth Boundary (UGB) that defines locations of future urban and suburban development. UGBs were created to preserve farm and forest lands from urban growth, while maintaining an area large enough to provide sufficient housing for 20 years within a developed core. Areas outside the UGB allow only development at very low density and other uses that conform with resource land goals.

Interactive version of this map – (Boundaries/Urban Growth Boundary and Other - Urban and Rural Reserves)

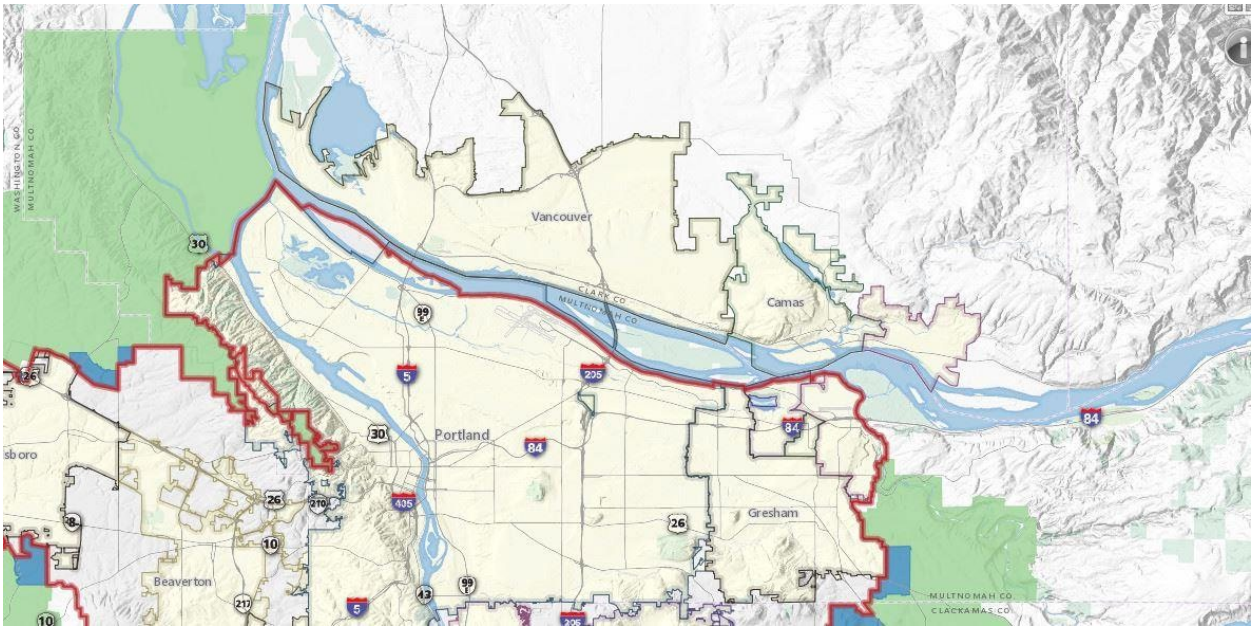


Figure 8 - Urban Growth Boundary of the Portland Metro region outlined in red. Areas in green are rural reserves and areas in blue are urban reserves. Map from Metro.

The UGB in Multnomah County has not expanded for 20 years. The area shown in blue on the above map southeast of Gresham is the only location in Multnomah County identified as an urban reserve, where a future expansion of the UGB would be most likely to occur. Areas in green are rural reserves, where there are high-value farms or forests or natural features, and are designated to remain in those uses for at least 50 years.

The maintenance of forest lands in particular maintains a risk of major wildfire in the rural parts of the county and to communities on the edges of the UGB. However, the UGB's limits on suburban development in those forests also reduces vulnerability from new subdivisions that would create significant fire protection challenges.

Prioritizing denser development to meet housing supply needs within UGB limits also means that dense single and multi-family housing can be expected to be built in Wildland Urban Interface areas near the UGB and in higher-risk areas within city limits such as along ridges and near buttes, vegetated greenways, and road and utility right-of-ways.

High-risk wildfire areas such as Forest Park, Gresham's East Buttes and the west side of the Sandy River are within the UGB. Different locations within the UGB have different zoning designations and different density rules, but critical housing needs are expected to create pressure for increased housing density across the county.

Low-density housing outside the UGB is permitted, but population growth has not occurred in those locations based on 2010-2020 census data.

2.4 Climate

Multnomah County's climate is typical of the Willamette Valley, being relatively cool and free of extreme temperatures and with a long growing season. Wet winters and springs are typical and a dry season usually starts in early July and ends sometime in September. Repeated temperature extremes have been frequent over the last five years and have caused recent fire seasons to begin earlier and end later.

Typical weather patterns in Multnomah County see the bringing of high-pressure systems beginning in late summer/early fall, as cool dry air begins to move down from Canada. These high-pressure systems cause dry winds to blow from the east.[20] If these winds arrive before the return of rain and intersect with the driest period of local vegetation, the highest local wildfire risk conditions are created.[21]

Dry east winds have been a part of nearly every major fire in the county's history. As fire seasons grow hotter and lengthen in time, the rate of extreme risk increases. Climate change may also alter the frequency and timing of these high-pressure systems.

[20] In the 1902 Yacolt Fire, these fire weather conditions were known as 'Devil Winds.'
[21] First east wind event of the season means high fire danger!, Fox 12 Oregon, Mark Nelsen, September 7, 2022

Chapter 3 - Plan Update Process

The plan update process originated with the funding of a Fire Management Grant from FEMA, as part of post-disaster funds made available after the 2017 Eagle Creek Fire. These funds were used to pay for Multnomah County Emergency Management staff time to manage this project.

The stakeholder process kicked off in late 2019. Shortly after the plan kickoff, a Steering Committee to address wildfire planning and a Subcommittee to address wildfire smoke planning were created. Further planning processes were built through these committees.

Shortly after the update kicked off, the COVID-19 pandemic prevented any progress for nearly the entirety of 2020. The extreme 2020 Oregon wildfire and wildfire smoke season and ensuing state policy developments continued to emphasize the need for this update.

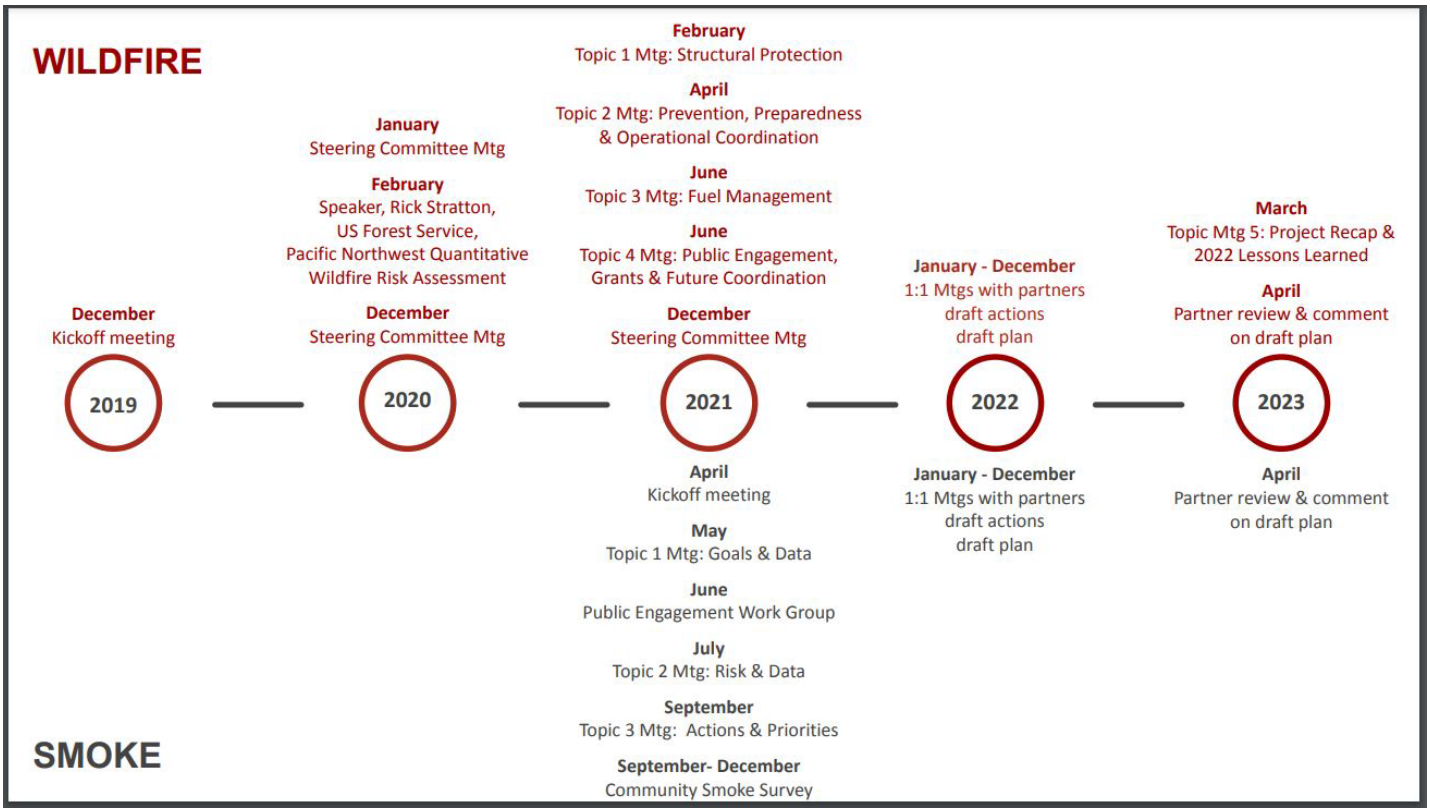
Planning team work was resumed in 2021, with stakeholder meetings held throughout the spring to address mitigation priorities over different topic areas. The wildfire portion of the update took a hiatus through the summer fire season, and work was re-engaged in the fall with a goal of completing the plan in Spring 2022.

Staff shortages and competing priorities prevented the project from meeting that goal before the fire season restarted again in 2022. The project was again prioritized after the 2022 fire season, with a revised goal for completion by Summer 2023. Individual meetings between the project manager and plan stakeholders occurred in 2022 and early 2023.

The COVID-19 pandemic restructured public engagement, with in-person meetings replaced by online meetings. Opportunities to meet with neighborhood and community groups to discuss the project and to collect additional information from residents, and public engagement efforts by local fire districts, were ongoing. A more comprehensive public engagement process regarding the plan update is planned for later in 2023.

Figure 9 - A flyer for a wildfire mitigation meeting held during the plan update process.

3.1 Project Timeline



- ***December 12, 2019*** - CWPP Update Project Kickoff Meeting

- ***January 30, 2020*** - CWPP Steering Committee Meeting
- ***February 28, 2020*** - Wildfire Speaker Event – Rick Stratton, US Forest Service, Co-Author – *Pacific Northwest Quantitative Wildfire Risk Assessment*
- ***December 17, 2020*** – CWPP Steering Committee Meeting

- ***February 11, 2021*** – Wildfire Stakeholder Meeting #1 (Structural Protection)
- ***April 14, 2021*** – Wildfire Smoke subcommittee kickoff
- ***April 29, 2021*** – Wildfire Stakeholder Meeting #2 (Fire Prevention, Preparedness and Operational Coordination)
- ***June 2, 2021*** – Wildfire Smoke Public Engagement sub-group meeting
- ***June 3, 2021*** - Wildfire Stakeholder Meeting #3 (Wildfire Fuel Management)
- ***June 7, 2021*** – Wildfire Smoke Data sub-group meeting
- ***June 22, 2021*** - Wildfire Stakeholder Meeting #4 (Public Engagement, Grants, and Future Coordination)
- ***July 14, 2021*** – Wildfire Smoke subcommittee meeting (Risk & Data)
- ***September 30, 2021*** – Wildfire Smoke subcommittee meeting (Mitigation Actions)

- ***October 26, 2021*** – Wildfire Smoke subcommittee meeting (Mitigation Actions)
- ***December 17, 2021*** – CWPP Steering Committee Meeting
- ***March 7, 2023*** – Wildfire Stakeholder Meeting #5 (Project Recap and 2022 Lessons Learned)
- ***April 25, 2023*** – CWPP Steering Committee Meeting

3.2 Stakeholder Organization

Stakeholder partnership is an essential element of the CWPP process and was a priority for this revision. Along with all of Multnomah County's fire districts and the state forest management agency (ODF), an effort was made to include:

- Federal and state agencies involved in firefighting, fire and smoke mitigation and environmental health
- City and county departments or bureaus with roles in land management, public health and human services, land use, and homeless services
- Electric utility partners
- Regional governmental bodies
- Other local land management and conservation districts and representatives of community organizations.

A more detailed list of participating partners for each hazard are located in the respective Wildfire and Wildfire Smoke chapters.