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Power & Planning: A Critical Comparison of Tribal and Non-Tribal Wildfire Protection Plans

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Christian Heisler

Power & Planning: A Critical Comparison of Tribal and Non-Tribal Wildfire Protection Plans

In 2003, the US government passed the Healthy Forest Restoration Act, which urged wildfire-prone communities to develop Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs). These plans allow local groups to contextualize risk, practice social learning, and develop social capital while addressing wildfire risk. Within planning realms, however, decision-making power is usually concentrated unequally between social groups which can limit the influence of marginalized communities. Tribal nations, specifically, have been excluded from wildfire planning since European contact, signaling that CWPPs may not reflect Indigenous worldviews and priorities. Given the recent push from the federal government to increase land management collaboration with tribes, it is necessary to understand how power shapes collaborative planning processes such as CWPP development. My research views the production of wildfire plans as an exercise of discursive power, as they construct narratives around wildfire that reflect particular cultural values. Through a critical discourse analysis of Oregon wildfire plans and interviews with Indigenous and non-Indigenous wildfire planners, I seek to 1) identify ideological differences between tribal and non-tribal wildfire planners, 2) explain these differences from cultural, structural, and historical perspectives, 3) critique approaches that infringe upon tribal rights to self-determination, and 4) provide alternative planning approaches that better reflect tribal priorities.