

FIREWISE WORKSHOPS IGNITE COMMUNITY ACTION



Cynthia Bailey

The 2000 fire season provided dramatic evidence that local citizens must play a more active role in protecting their communities from wildland fire. Communication among a diversity of community leaders, followed by transforming words into action to build fire-prudent neighborhoods, is the goal of the national Firewise Communities workshops. The workshops bring professionals together to discuss their occupational perspectives while they learn how to incorporate sound Firewise planning concepts.

As we build more homes near the wildland–urban interface, the threat to life and property from wildland fire increases. Firewise workshops emphasize community fire safety by fostering partnerships among the people who plan, regulate, build, buy, sell, and protect homes.

Firewise Communities workshops feature approaches to implementing fire-resistant practices in community developments, assessing hazards, developing and modifying structures, and implementing Firewise landscaping and building techniques. The national Firewise Communities program is guided by the Wildland/Urban Interface Working Team of the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (see sidebar).

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Severe fire seasons and evolving insights into land and resource management have generated a series of recent initiatives for wildland fire management.

In the Beginning

The National Wildland/Urban Interface Fire Program was established in 1986 to help firefighters and communities mitigate the impact of wildland fire on residential areas. The USDA Forest Service,

the National Fire Protection Association, and a variety of other Federal agencies and national organizations support the program.

Firewise Communities is one of the most successful projects of the



Smoke billowing behind a home in Valley of the Pines, ID. This and other homes in the wildland–urban interface were threatened by the 1994 Star Gulch Fire. Firewise Communities workshops are designed to help communities in the wildland–urban interface assess fire hazards and implement fire-resistant landscaping and building techniques. Photo: USDA Forest Service, 1994.

National Wildland/Urban Interface Fire Program. The target audience for each workshop is a spectrum of community leaders. The people who determine whether a community can withstand the effects of a nearby wildland fire are those who influence how neighborhoods are designed, built, maintained, and protected.

In the past century, the U.S. population has nearly tripled, with much of the growth flowing into areas where wildland fires have historically occurred. Since 1970, more than 15,000 homes and 21,000 other structures have been lost to severe wildland fire in the United States. These losses have generated suppression costs of \$25 billion and insurance restitution costs of \$10 billion. Because of the staggering costs associated with wildland fire, Firewise Communities workshops stress the economic benefits of improving fire safety within communities.

As wildland fire continues to ravage rural communities, the USDA Forest Service and partners are sponsoring a 3-year series of regional Firewise workshops.

Of particular concern is the building/loss/rebuilding cycle that occurs after wildland fires sweep through an area. Low-cost loans and insurance funds help homeowners rebuild. Unfortunately, property owners often recreate the same conditions that led to the original loss by rebuilding nearly identical homes on the same sites. The Firewise Communities program teaches homeowners to break this cycle by remembering the motto, "Making sensible choices for safety from fire in the wildland-urban interface."

Why Firewise?

Although no community is completely safe from wildland fire, wise community design and prescribed fire can mitigate the impact of fire. Firewise Communities emphasizes that every citizen has a responsibility to recognize fire as an inherent part of the ecosystem and that solutions and options exist to help communities adopt a Firewise lifestyle.

The Firewise Communities program is founded on the conviction that homes can be designed, built, and maintained to withstand wildland fire without intervention by local firefighting resources. Communities that are designed using Firewise concepts can save lives, homes, views, wildlife habitat, and recreational settings, while protecting investments and increasing property values. Firewise practices, promoted since 1986, have attracted new, nontraditional partners in fire protection and fire

FIREWISE COMMUNITIES

Firewise Communities is a national mitigation planning program that encourages communities to include land use planning, building codes, landscaping codes, zoning, and fire protection in developing new communities and retrofitting existing communities.

Firewise Communities supports the idea that positive incentives to build better structures and communities must be placed at the beginning of any project, as structures are being planned, rather than at the end, after a disaster has destroyed them.

The goal of Firewise Communities is to ensure that homes are designed, built, and maintained to withstand a wildland fire without the intervention of a fire department or wildland fire agency.

Firewise Communities is principally supported by the National Wildfire Coordinating Group and its

Wildland/Urban Interface Working Team, which includes the:

- National Fire Protection Association,
- USDA Forest Service,
- U.S. Department of the Interior (USDI) Bureau of Indian Affairs,
- USDI Bureau of Land Management,
- USDI Fish and Wildlife Service,
- USDI National Park Service,
- U.S. Fire Administration,
- National Association of State Foresters,
- National Association of Fire Chiefs,
- National Association of State Fire Marshals, and
- National Association of Emergency Managers

For more on Firewise Communities, including lists of stakeholders and upcoming workshop dates, see the organization's Website at <<http://www.firewise.org/communities/>>.

Firewise workshops have reached more than 600 community leaders representing about 400 communities in 39 States.

safety education, and have saved an estimated \$40 million annually in fire suppression costs.

National Workshops

The first of 26 Firewise Communities workshops was held in Deerfield Beach, FL, in November 1999; the final session is scheduled for Washington, DC, in April 2003. The Firewise workshops introduce community leaders to Firewise concepts during a 3-day program featuring dynamic presentations, state-of-the-art geographical information systems mapping, and wildland fire simulations. Workshop exercises give participants hands-on experience and an opportunity to discuss issues with professionals from a variety of disciplines. Speakers enhance the program by providing motivation, Firewise expertise, and local community “success stories” lending regional perspective.

Eventually, more than 2,000 community leaders and professionals—about 100 per workshop—will have participated in the Firewise series. Organizers encourage a mix of attendees who represent diverse professional disciplines as well as firefighters and foresters. Participants who have completed national workshops have scheduled an additional series of 1-day regional miniworkshops around the country, reaching more than 1,500 additional attendees.

Recognition Program

Knowing that thousands of communities are at risk from wildland fire across the United States, the organizers of the Firewise Communities program have initiated a new activity—working with at-risk communities to highlight their Firewise work. Recently honored communities that have exemplified the Firewise Communities program

include Prescott, AZ; Glendale, CA; Orange County, FL; Ormond Beach, FL; Frenchtown, MT; Santa Fe, NM; and Sundance, UT.

The Firewise concept is that everyone in every community is responsible for fire protection. Firewise Communities workshops help define those responsibilities to make a lasting impression on the people involved in community planning and to ignite action to change the way people live and work in every neighborhood within our fire ecosystem.

For additional information about the Firewise Communities workshops, contact Jim Smalley, 617-984-7483 (voice), 617-984-7056 (fax), jsmalley@firewise.org (e-mail); or Dan W. Bailey, 406-329-3933 (voice), 406-329-3806 (fax), dbailey@firewise.org (e-mail). ■

CORRECTION: ROSCOMMON EQUIPMENT CENTER'S ORIGINS

The Summer 2001 issue of *Fire Management Today* erroneously reported that the Forest Fire Equipment Center was established in Roscommon, MI, in 1976 (see Richard J. Mangan, “Equipment Standardization Reduces Costs on Wildland Fires,” *Fire Management Today* 61(3): 11).

In 1929, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and the USDA Forest Service jointly established the Forest Fire Experiment Station (FFES) in Roscommon, MI. In addition to researching fire behavior, FFES developed firefighting equipment, which by 1940 was the station's primary activity. In 1972, with the cooperation of the Northeast Forest Fire Supervisors, the

Roscommon Equipment Center (REC) was formed using FFES staff. Since 1999, REC has been sponsored by the National Association of State Foresters.

Thanks for the correction go to Brian Hutchins, a unit leader engineer for FFES, Roscommon, MI. ■

FIRE EDUCATION CORPS ASSISTS HOMEOWNERS



Danny Ebert and Jody Handly

In 2001, homeowners in the wildland–urban interface of Idaho and Nevada obtained a new resource: college volunteers willing to help them learn how to reduce the risk from wildland fires to homes and neighborhoods. Fifty-two college interns from the Student Conservation Association (SCA) Fire Education Corps, working through the nationally recognized Firewise program (see the article by Cynthia Bailey beginning on page 4), spent the summer educating homeowners on ways to make their properties more firesafe.

Origins

The 2000 fire season was the most severe since the 1950s. Some 8.4 million acres (34 million ha) burned nationwide, destroying more than 800 structures. Many of the largest blazes occurred in the Northern Rockies. Homes and communities in the region, especially in the wildland–urban interface, clearly faced a growing threat from wildland fire.

In the fall of 2000, representatives from Idaho's Boise National Forest met with counterparts from the Home Depot, Inc., district for Idaho and Montana to sign a memorandum of understanding. The partners agreed to work together to educate rural communities on

actions property owners can take to fireproof their homes and properties. The mechanism that both parties agreed to use was an education and prevention program patterned after the Firewise program.

The partners worked with the SCA, the National Fire Protection Association, the Keep Idaho Green Fire Prevention Committee, the U.S. Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the Idaho State Department of Lands, and local Resource Conservation and Development Councils to develop a project called the SCA Fire Education Corps. The project received \$325,000 in funding through the National Fire Plan, a 1:1 monetary match with the Idaho Department of Lands, and another \$140,000 through BLM's Nevada office.

Student Interns

"This project was the direct result of National Fire Plan funding in the fire prevention and education area. The project is emphasizing community assistance in the wildland–urban interface areas," said Guy Pence, Boise National Forest fire staff officer. The SCA interns worked in seven communities, five in Idaho (Boise, Coeur d'Alene, McCall, Pocatello, and Salmon) and two in Nevada (Carson City and Elko). Contributions included:

- Staffing workshops and model home demonstration sites at local Home Depot stores, and
- Working with communities or neighborhoods to develop fuel reduction projects.

In each community, seven-person teams were trained in wildland–urban interface property inspection and in methods for working with neighborhoods. They concentrated their efforts in areas where fires might start and spread to homes surrounded by dense, dry fuels. The SCA Fire Education Corps is a neighbor-to-neighbor program for working together productively to stop new fires and reduce homeowner risks from wildfires.

Enthusiastic Response

Congressional representatives briefed on the SCA Fire Education Corps responded enthusiastically. Christine Heggem, an aide to Senator Conrad Burns (R-MT), asked whether an SCA team could be based in Missoula, MT, to serve homeowners in western Montana.

"This is an ambitious program," said Pence. "Local communities and homeowners are measurably gaining from the education tips provided, for example by implementing simple landscaping activities."

For more on the SCA Fire Education Corps, visit the SCA website at <www.sca-inc.org/fire/home.htm>. ■

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