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2006 National Wildland/Urban Interface Fire Education Conference

Firewise Communities is pleased to announce the dates for the **National Wildland/Urban Interface Fire Education Conference – *Backyards and Beyond*** to be held in Denver, Colorado November 2-4, 2006. The conference will be offering many of the great training and networking opportunities of the 2004 conference with several new enhancements.

The conference will offer over 60 quality educational sessions allowing you to customize your experience from six conference tracks. In 2004, over 500 people participated and you'll be able to network with other like-minded professionals, share best practices, and join the Wildland/Urban Interface Fire Working Team celebrate the program's major accomplishments. Participants who are encouraged to attend range from the homeowner/residents, landowner to building and landscape professionals, federal, state, county and local agencies. Foresters, insurers, fire fighters, planners and real estates professionals will also be in attendance.

Attendees who have an interest in hazard assessment can attend a special two-day pre-conference workshop, some of the topics covered include sequential elements of a W/UI fire disaster, research and case studies, risk factors in the home ignition zone, general health of the ecosystem, how to inspect the home ignition zone and prepare assessment reports.

Save the date now and look for conference updates and registration information on the Firewise Communities website www.firewise.org. We look forward to seeing you in Denver in 2006!

Here are some comments from participants to the *Backyards and Beyond* conference held in November 2004:

"Good to have a mix of hands on practice, as well as theory sessions."

"...It was difficult to choose between some of the education topics offered at the same time."

"Speakers were very knowledgeable and had great handouts for us to take home to use."

"Conference planners did an outstanding job in selection of topics and speakers."

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"The Hazard Assessment Training was outstanding with excellent instructors that kept our interest and participation throughout the three-day sessions."

"Diversity of topics was excellent. Attendees were able to "tailor education to one's needs."

"This has been an excellent conference with topics that relate to all aspects of my job. Speakers were very knowledgeable and were easy to follow." Forest Ranger Technician

"An exciting step in the right direction if we expect to promote awareness and real results in battling the interface."

"The projects that were shown were excellent and impressive."



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Call for Presentations to WUI Fire Education Conference

Proposals are now being accepted for educational presentations at the *2006 National Wildland/Urban Interface Fire Education Conference - Backyards And Beyond*. You are invited to share your experience and expertise with community leaders, residents, wildland/urban interface fire department personnel, fire and emergency management personnel, insurance professionals, landscape professionals, planners, and builders as a presenter in Denver, Colorado November 2-4, 2006. The Conference features training sessions in 1-hour, 90 minute, and 2-hour sessions. All presentation proposals will be reviewed and selections will be made based on quality, relevance, focus, practical application, and on the presenter's experience.

If you would like to be a speaker to share your experience and expertise with community leaders, residents, wildland/urban interface fire department personnel, fire and emergency management personnel, insurance professionals, landscape professionals, planners and builders during the National Wildland/Urban Interface Fire Education Conference, please visit the Firewise website at www.firewise.org and download the "Call for Presentation" form.

Please note the National Wildland/Urban Interface Fire Education Conference does not pay for travel expenses, but selected speakers will receive complimentary conference registration. Please contact Cheryl Blake at cblake@nfpa.org or Michele Steinberg at msteinberg@nfpa.org if you have any questions. Deadline for submission is December 31, 2005.



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Section of Beverly Hills Earns National Recognition for Wildfire Preparedness

Residents north of Sunset Boulevard in Beverly Hills are taking action to prepare for wildfires – and they've earned national distinction for their efforts. Because of its efforts to reduce the vulnerability of homes and landscapes to wildfire, a portion of the City of Beverly Hills has been recognized as a Firewise Communities/USA. Beverly Hills is one of four communities in California to be recognized by the national Firewise Communities program and joins 121 other communities in 29 states.

"I am very proud that our community has taken responsibility for reducing the risk from wildfire damage and loss," said Beverly Hills Mayor Linda J. Briskman. "By taking some simple precautions, residents and firefighters working together have a much better chance of saving homes during a serious brush fire."

An award was presented by the national Firewise Communities program during a ceremony at Coldwater Canyon Park on September 22, 2005, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection Chief Dale T. Geldert, Beverly Hills Fire Chief Bob Cavaglieri and Mayor Briskman attended, along with Firewise officials and numerous community members and City officials concerned with fire prevention and safety.

"In California, the Firewise Communities/USA program is just getting off the ground," remarked CDF's Director, Chief Dale T. Geldert. "This grass roots community-driven program provides a structure and framework to bring neighbors together to not only learn about the hazards of living in fire-prone areas, but what they can do to live in harmony with fire, protect themselves and their homes."

"The record-breaking rains this past season have spurred record growth in the hillsides, which magnifies the fire danger," said Chief Cavaglieri. "But with Firewise landscaping and proper brush clearance, you can create a defensible space around your home."

Homeowners and residents in the recognized section of the city have worked over the past year and half to achieve Firewise recognition. Recently, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) announced that Firewise Communities/USA recognition would give communities priority when applying for pre-disaster mitigation planning and project grants.

In order to receive this recognition, the residents of Beverly Hills completed the following activities:

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- Enlisted nationally known wildland/urban interface specialist Jack Cohen to complete a community assessment and create a plan that identifies agreed-upon, achievable solutions to be implemented by the community.
- Created a local Firewise board comprised of City of Beverly Hills residents and staff that maintains the Firewise Communities/USA program and tracks its progress or status.
- Held Firewise Communities/USA information days over the past 18 months that were dedicated to informing the community about Firewise.
- Invested approximately \$10,000 this year in local Firewise projects which currently includes providing public education booths at numerous community events throughout the year and designation of parkland for a Firewise and Waterwise garden.
- Submitted an annual report to Firewise Communities/USA that documents continuing compliance with the program.

The national Firewise Communities program is an interagency program designed to encourage local solutions for wildfire safety by involving homeowners, community leaders, planners, developers and firefighters. The three other Firewise Communities/USA-designated communities in California are **Auburn Lake Trails** in Cool, **Whiting Woods** in Glendale, and **Forest Meadows** in Calaveras County.

If you would like more information about Firewise in Beverly Hills, please contact Greg Barton, Firewise Board Chairperson, at gbarton@beverlyhills.org or visit the Firewise Communities/USA website at www.firewise.org/usa



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Firewise Participates in White House Conference on Cooperative Conservation

Over 1,000 participants from all across the United States joined in St. Louis, Missouri this past August, representing conservation groups and private-sector companies; local, state, tribal, and federal agencies; recreation enthusiasts, ranchers, framers, hunters and anglers for the White House Conference on Cooperative Conservation.

The national assembly, initiated by President George W. Bush through an executive order, aimed at strengthening conservation partnerships with states, tribes, and local communities and promoting citizen stewardship of our natural and cultural resources.

The national Firewise Communities program has been a model of cooperation between federal, tribal, state, and local government; private industry; non-profit organizations; and community groups. At the heart of the program is a focus on personal responsibility. Communities are encouraged to adopt a long-term, proactive approach to protect their homes and resources from the risk of wildland fire-before a fire starts.

"When adequately prepared, a house can withstand a wildland fire without the intervention of the fire service. In fact, a house and its surrounding community can be both Firewise and compatible with the area's ecosystem." Said Jim Smalley, Manager of the National Firewise Communities Program.

Agencies and organizations responsible for wildland fire management agree: we can reduce loss of lives, property, resources to wildland fire by building and maintaining communities in a way that is compatible with our natural surroundings. While this is a common goal across the U.S., there is no single solution, the Firewise Communities program emphasizes a local decision-making process whereby diverse interests can come together and determine solutions that are most appropriate for their community. The most successful wildfire mitigation programs are driven by the individuals who will be most impacted by their efforts--the residents.

The three-day conference featured speakers from diverse backgrounds with participants having an opportunity to work together in breakout sessions, design to discuss comments and layer them with their own experiences and insights. In addition, the conference featured an exhibit area allowing other participants to learn about the Firewise Communities program.

Additional information about Cooperative Conservation can be found at the website www.cooperativeconservationamerica.org.

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Cleared brush saved homes in Waikoloa

By Rod Thompson, Honolulu Star-Bulletin

This article, originally published in the Honolulu Star-Bulletin on August 9th, 2005, is reprinted with permission.

When a range fire ran through 25,000 acres of grassland in Waikoloa, Hawaii in [August], it jumped firebreak after firebreak until it reached the last one bordering Waikoloa village. Cleared by hand weeks in advance by Waikoloa residents in a program called Firewise, the last firebreak held. "Firewise works," said Pete Hoffmann, chairman of the Waikoloa Firewise Committee and a member of the Hawaii County Council.



A free Firewise brush fire safety workshop [held later late month] at the Waikoloa Elementary School by Denise Laitinen, who will present the workshop, emphasized that it was planned long before [the] fire. In other words, like the nationwide Firewise program, the intent is not to react, but to take preventive measures. The Waikoloa Firewise group had anticipated a fire coming downhill, pushed by strong winds, jumping hastily prepared firebreaks, Hoffmann said. "It was our worst fear."

So they prepared for it, clearing a 30-foot firebreak on July 9th, arranging to haul away six truckloads of burnable materials. Another five loads were waiting to be hauled when the fire struck. The 30-foot clearing, three times the width of a bulldozer blade, gave firefighters time to respond, said fire Capt. Michael Milare. Without it the fire could have entered the village, he said. In fact, "nobody was hurt; no homes were lost," Hoffmann said.

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But the need for a Firewise style of prevention continues. A 40-foot-deep gully in Waikoloa is full of dry vegetation that could burn, Hoffmann said. The community of 5,000 people has just a single street for entry and exit. Hoffmann has \$50,000 in federal funding to build a gravel escape road as soon as planning is completed. Homeowners also need to learn how to create a fuel-free space around their house, Laitinen said. That means keeping heavy vegetation at least 30 feet back from the house and placing screens to keep embers from underneath houses built on posts and piers.



Firewise Tested by Fire

By Chief Dean Kapler, Ramsey Fire Department and Dave Schuller, DNR Firewise Specialist

Reprinted with permission from the Minnesota Fire Chief – July/August 2005, Vol. 41, No. 6, www.msfc.org

April 9, 2005, the skies were clear, temps were at 60 degrees, humidity at 37 percent and winds were out of the southeast at twelve, gusting to twenty-two. It was a good fire day; if you liked fire. A homeowner was in the back yard trying to burn some papers. It took several matches to light the paper. They kept blowing out. Finally, the paper caught and blew across the yard into the brown swamp grass at the back of the property. The grass caught, and off it raced, pushed by the winds.

The fire was angling toward a pine grove, due west of the fire origin.

This was Trap Rock, a neighborhood that had just completed an extensive Firewise project the year before. Seventeen homeowners in this neighborhood had banded together and with the help of the City of Ramsey and Firewise Grant funding had made significant improvements. These homes were nestled in a decadent, overcrowded Scotch and Norway pine stand. Many dead and dying trees dotted the landscape. Fire ladder fuel was everywhere. The 'hairy' Scotch pine had dead branches to the ground and young seedlings grew up to meet them in a carpet of fuel.

The Firewise project involved thinning out most of the Scotch pine, giving the remaining Norway pines room to grow. As part of the project, ladder fuels were removed, eliminating the thick carpet of Scotch pine seedlings and pruning the branches up eight feet on the residual trees. A logger did much of the work, taking the logs to a pulp mill. The remaining branches were ground up and hauled to St. Paul's District Energy to fire their boilers, providing electricity to downtown St. Paul.

The site was transformed from a tangled fire prone jungle, to a pristine park-like neighborhood; and none too soon.

As the wildfire, with flame lengths reaching five feet, raced across the landscape, it entered the Trap Rock development in one area. The tall swamp grass gave way to a sparse ground cover of pine needles, chips and grass. Flame lengths dropped to just inches. The rest of the fire raced on by, heading northwest along the swamp. Under the pines the fire crept. Soon firefighters, DNR staff and property owners were there, snuffing out the creeping fire a safe fifty yards from homes. The remainder of fire was contained by water dropping helicopters, CL215 water bombers and on the ground firefighters. The 160-acre fire was contained to the swamp and the edges of yards that surrounded it.

But this story could have ended differently.



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Imagine this, if this fire had happened two years earlier, there would have been ladder fuels and dense pine along the edge of the swamp. An early, warm spring would have these ladder fuels dry and ready for fire. The fire could have climbed out of the swamp grass right into the pine boughs, igniting a crown fire that would have exploded through the pine grove, possibly igniting between three and six homes before the firefighters could reach them. The peaceful, serene whispering pine forest may have been laid waste to stark black scorched trees.

Many similar neighborhoods dot Minnesota. Some have taken steps to become Firewise, others have not. The Firewise program is designed to help communities address fire prone neighborhoods through funding and technical support. Is your community Firewise? If not, contact your local Department of Natural Resources – Forestry office or visit their website at www.dnr.state.mn.us/firewise.

Editor's note: *Firewise Communities/USA is a project of the National Wildfire Coordinating Group's Wildland/Urban Interface Working Team and is the newest element of the Firewise program. It provides citizens with the knowledge necessary to maintain an acceptable level of fire readiness, while ensuring firefighters that they can use equipment more efficiently during a wildland fire emergency. The program draws on a community's spirit, its resolve, and its willingness to take responsibility for its ignition potential. Please visit Firewise Communities/USA website at www.firewise.org/usa for additional information.*



Wildfires and home prices: Are they related?

Do wildfires influence the housing market? Is it a consideration when people buy or build? Geoffrey Donovan, an economist at the USDA Forest Service's Pacific Northwest Research Station in Portland, Ore., and his colleagues collaborated with the Colorado Springs Fire Department in Colorado to answer these questions.

The fire department developed a computer model to rate the wildfire risk of 35,000 parcels in the city's wildland-urban interface. Each parcel was given a fire risk rating: low, medium, high, very high, or extreme. The information was posted in 2002 on a fire department Website accessible to homeowners who wanted to determine the risk rating of their home and learn how to reduce fire risk.

"We found that before the wildfire risk ratings were made available," says Donovan, "houses at higher risk from wildfire had higher sales prices than similar houses with a lower wildfire risk. This result seemed counterintuitive, until we considered that factors that increase a home's wildfire risk, such as being located on a ridge, could also have desirable effects such as better views.

"However," he continues, "after the wildfire risk ratings were released, we no longer observed a relationship between wildfire risk and housing prices. This was largely due to a change in tastes for flammable building materials.

"For example, before wildfire risk ratings were released, a wood roof added nearly \$12,000 to the home price, whereas after wildfire risk ratings were made available, houses with wood roofs sold for \$5,000 less than houses with less flammable roofs. It appears that the Fire Department's program successfully changed homeowner's attitudes concerning wildfire risk."

Cooperators in the study with Donovan are Captain Bill Mills and his team at the Colorado Springs Fire Department; Patricia Champ, Rocky Mountain Research Station/USDA Forest Service; and David Butry, Southern Research Station/USDA Forest Service. For more information about the Colorado survey visit <http://csfd.springsgov.com/>, and to learn more about the USDA Forest Service Research and Development visit <http://www.fs.fed.us/research/>

Source: USDA Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Research Station for additional information please contact Sherri Richardson-Dodge srichardsondodge@fs.fed.us (503) 808-2137



USDA ASSISTS WITH HURRICANE RELIEF EFFORTS

***Editor's Note** – The recovery and relief operation is a fluid and ever changing one. This report summarizes information from several agencies including the USDA Forest Service and the National Interagency Fire Center as of September 27th, 2005. If you wish to see updated agency response, we encourage you to visit either www.fs.fed.us or www.nifc.gov for the most current information. In future issues of the Firewise Newsletter we hope to continue coverage of these natural disasters and share personal experiences from agency personnel who helped in the region.*

Hurricane Katrina, a Category 4 Hurricane, made landfall on the Gulf Coast of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and the Florida panhandle on August 29, 2005. In addition, the region suffered a second blow when Hurricane Rita, a Category 3 Hurricane, struck the Texas and Louisiana border on September 24th. Since these storms thousands of people have been killed, injured and displaced by the ferocity of both hurricanes and after affects.

Each day that passes since the storm, thousands of people from federal, state, county, and local jurisdictions are being deployed to assist with the disasters. The USDA is providing several interagency resources operating under several area command teams. The duration of the event and the second major hurricane to strike the region in less than a month is causing the rotation of teams and personnel.

Area Command Team (Williams-Rhodes)—This team, located in Atlanta, is providing Incident Management Team coordination for FEMA Region IV for the states of Georgia, Mississippi, Florida, and Alabama. There are seven Incident Management Teams located in Stennis, MS; Gautier, MS; Mobile, AL; Gulfport, MS; Camp Shelby, MS; and Purvis, MS.

Area Command Team (Zimmerman)—This team, located in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, is coordinating Incident Management Teams in FEMA Region VI for the states of Louisiana. There are nine Incident Management Teams assigned in New Orleans, St. Gabriel, Hammond, Camp Beauregard, and Barksdale AFB, Louisiana; Lake Charles; Lafayette; and a Logistics Management Team in Texarkana, Texas and Barksdale AFB, LA.

Area Command Team (Rounsaville) – This team, located in Austin, Texas, is providing Incident Management Team coordination for the state of Texas. There are seven Incident Management Teams located in San Antonio; Lufkin; Beaumont; Houston; and Lufkin, Texas.

There are 31 Type 2 crews, 27 Type 2 IA crews, 23 Type 1 crews, and 51 camp crews (132 crews total), 2,368 overhead, including 154 FS and DOI law enforcement officers, totaling approximately 5,000 personnel on the incident as of September 27th, 2005.

Here are some of the highlights of work being performed by these personnel:

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- Urban search and rescue responders supported by Cable's IMT rescued a 91-year old woman from a house in New Orleans. She had been in a wheelchair, surviving on river water for 11 days. The water had been up to her neck at times during her ordeal.
- The state of North Carolina has activated one of its state teams and pre-positioned the team for recovery efforts. They also activated three division supervisors to go to counties along the coast for assessments.
- Two IMTs have cleared over 423 miles of road for the Chickasawhay Ranger District and Desoto National Forest recovery efforts in Mississippi. Another 150 miles are partially cleared. There is an estimated 100 miles remaining to be cleared by the dozers and saw teams. Fire danger remains a concern.
- IMT (Quesinberry) has shipped more than 2,600 truckloads of water, ice, MREs and other commodities and is providing supplies to a MASH Unit. Materiel has been shipped to 53 counties in six states over a fifteen-day period.
- IMT (Wilcock) received between 900-1,000 trailers and mobile homes at its five sites yesterday, shipping out around 500.
- IMT (Philbin) continues to receive evacuees, with around 1,300 registering at the shelter so far. 560 were transported directly via airplane, with the remaining making their way to Phoenix requesting the services of the shelter. Downsizing plans are being developed with transition and staffing plans for shelter closure.
- IMT (Jenkins) is managing the base camp/mob center at the New Orleans Airport. Caterers provided approximately 7,000 meals yesterday and have provided around 97,000 meals to date. The team is providing logistical support and technical advice in support of helicopter operations with the New Orleans FD.
- IMT (Thomas) supported around 800 first responders and other personnel from the American Red Cross, Meridian Hospital Group, US Marines, Hospital Construction Group, Mental Health Workers, Coastal Regional Health workers, base police, camp staff, and others. The team is expecting close to 850 people as of this date and can support an additional 700 people.
- IMT (Swed) is providing support for employee and families and trying to locate unaccounted for MMS employee. Yesterday one of two missing employees was located. The team removed 419 cultural resources. Wind-blown trees unearthed human remains and archaeological specialists were notified.

"Although wildland fire is our primary focus, we are organized to respond to all types of emergencies and we have the expertise needed to manage large, complex

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incidents," said Phil Street, fire director for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and spokesman for the National Multi Agency Coordinating group. Incident Management Teams, hand crews, logistics specialists, and other support personnel are responding to assist FEMA at sites from Georgia to Florida, Louisiana, Alabama, Texas and Mississippi. "We are participating at all levels of the incident response," Street said. "We have crews there with skilled sawyers to help remove damaged and fallen trees, along with management and logistics teams to manage staging areas for distributing supplies, and more. We also have planning teams in place that are assisting with long-term recovery planning."

The National Interagency Fire Center has conducted a Wildland Fire Risk Assessment to evaluate increased fire risk to the hurricane-damaged areas. Hurricanes significantly impact forested lands at several scales and often set the stage for more intense fires. After the 2004 Hurricane assessment it was estimated about 55 million acres were affected by four hurricanes. Hurricane Katrina, in of itself, has affected approximately 60 million acres. Determination of post hurricane fuel conditions was done on a very general scale due to the time constraints. Maps displaying the wind velocity, rainfall patterns, and tornado activity were developed and used to generate maps of damage areas. Four damage level categories were determined (scattered light, light, moderate, and severe). This was validated based on visual observation in the effected areas. The total land affected by the Hurricane Katrina is 60,840,000 acres. Of this, 32, 548,000 acres will need additional preparedness, fire prevention and fuel reduction work to mitigate the damage caused by the hurricane. Ninety percent of the damage is located on state or private land, with the vast majority of this being on private land. Theses acre numbers do include non-forested land. This additional workload is well beyond the normal fire budget of the state and federal agencies. Local fire managers were contacted to verify damage and general assumptions used in this assessment, plus provide tactical proposals to for mitigating fuels build up situation. The strategy includes prevention, preparedness (initial attack), and support to local fire districts and fuels treatments. Short-range forecast for the affected are indicate below normal rainfall for the next 14 days. Normal rainfall conditions are expected over the next several months. However, September and October are the two months with the lowest annual rainfall for the area. Unless, significant mitigation steps are taken immediately, one can expect wildland fires to pose very real hazard to the area. This will obviously be a long-term issue as well.

General recommendations are made for prevention, preparedness resource needs above normal staffing and fuels treatment are proposed at a total cost of over 223 million dollars. Immediate and long-term fire prevention activities should take place. Increases in the number and capabilities of initial attack resources are required. Also, extensive fuel reduction work will be needed. This will require both mechanical and prescribe burning activities. This will require collaboration with local, state and federal agencies. Due to extraordinary costs and number of acres damaged, additional assessments will be needed. These can be done at the local level based on actually mapping (which was not available at the time of this analysis) and tiered to state level assessments. The analysis at the state level will be needed in order to prioritize the work to be done and the allocation of funding for suppression resources.



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To view the full Wildland Fire Risk Assessment please click on the link
<http://gacc.nifc.gov/sacc/predictive/outlooks/200FinalHurricaneKatrinaFireRiskAssessment.pdf>

An assessment for Hurricane Rita has not been released to date.



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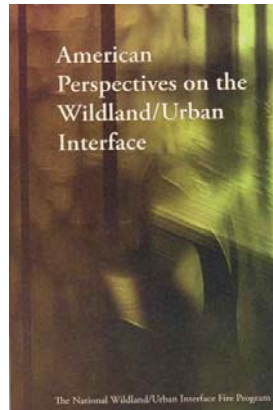
Acceptability of Smoke From Prescribed Forest Burning in the Northern Inland West: A Focus Group Approach

By: Weisshaupt, Brad R.; Carroll, Matthew S.; Blatner, Keith A.; Robinson, William D.; Jakes, Pamela J. as published in the [Journal of Forestry](#), Volume 103, Number 4, June 2005, from the [Society of American Foresters](#)

Focus groups were used to gauge tolerance of smoke from broadcast prescribed forest burning in the wildland-urban interface of the northern Inland West. Focus group participants worked through issues surrounding prescribed burning as a management tool to determine if the origin of smoke made a difference in the acceptance of that smoke. Participant responses across five different population sectors suggest that prescribed forest burning could be applied as a forest management tool with a well-informed public and that establishing and maintaining a dialogue with the public may be the most important part of any fire prescription. Members of the Society of American Foresters can view the article online or it can be ordered from the website www.safnet.org/periodicals/journal.cfm.

Calling the Wildland/Urban Interface Home

By Carrie Wiss



*The following is an excerpt from the book **American Perspectives on the Wildland/Urban Interface** a compilation of personal viewpoints from stakeholders, local, state, and federal agencies, private and public landowners, and concerned citizens. The intent of the publication is to provide an opportunity to explore various perspectives on the interface growth, current assessment of the wildland/urban interface from an individual discipline to other like professionals, (concerns, solutions, and/or recommendations) as to what the future wildland/urban interface situation might hold, and possible solutions. Each chapter represents a discipline that affects (or can affect) continued growth in the wildland/urban interface including the impact on our natural resources and the safety of residents and firefighters. The book can easily be ordered through the [Online Firewise Publications Catalog](#) for only a nominal shipping charge.*

In August 1994, my husband and I returned home from a backpacking trip to find that Wilderness Ranch, the community northeast of Boise, Idaho, in which we live, was preparing for a possible evacuation. An arsonist had ignited a forest fire about three miles from the Ranch, and if the wind shifted before the fire was contained, lives and property at the Ranch would be at risk.

Feeling too anxious to go home and just wait for something to happen, we drove to the community's fire hall and asked the volunteer firefighters if there was anything we could do to help. The fire chief told us that we couldn't do much in the way of helping to contain the fire or protecting homes without proper training, but we could assist with securing the Ranch. So, for the next 72 hours we worked in shifts with other homeowners, standing vigil at the entrance to our community, making sure that everyone who drove in was a resident or had a legitimate reason for being there.

We watched with worried fascination the Forest Service fire camp that had been established in a meadow across the canyon from our community—constant vehicle and helicopter traffic throughout the day, and the yellow glow of lights inside tents at night. Our neighbors prepared and delivered food to the firefighters and talked about the calling tree that would be used to notify residents if an all out evacuation was recommended. We all went about our daily lives as best we could, but whenever we



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left our homes, we couldn't help but wonder if they would still be there when we returned.

Eventually, the fire was contained, and the danger had—for the time being—subsided. My husband and I attended the very next training with our volunteer fire department. As fledgling firefighters, we heard the term "wildland/urban interface" for the first time and learned about the unique hazards faced by those of us who have chosen to live among trees instead of high-rises.

Imagine our surprise when, during a lecture on how topography affects fire behavior, the instructor used our home as an example of a residence situated in a "box canyon" that would be difficult, if not impossible to defend in the event of a wildfire! We had thought our house was relatively safe because there aren't any trees around it. It was clear that we needed to become better educated about the fire hazards in our own back yard and take action to create defensible space around our home.

We learned a lot about the hazards that put homes at Wilderness Ranch—including our own—at risk when we helped update the pre-incident attack plans for several houses.



The plan document contains detailed information about every house on the Ranch, including the materials used in their construction, features of the topography and nearby vegetation, proximity to fire hydrants or other water sources, obvious hazards such as power lines and propane tanks, and the safest places to stage fire suppression equipment.

The purpose of the pre-incident attack plan is to give firefighters some idea of what to expect before they arrive at a house that is burning. The plan also helps homeowners identify fire dangers around the home that can be remedied. In our case, we removed the charcoal lighter fluid, used motor oil, and some other flammable materials from under our cedar deck. We were relieved to learn that our metal roof and the double pane glass in all our windows and doors were protective features.

Perhaps our greatest challenge in tackling the defensible space issue was trying to “tame” the high desert landscape in which our home is situated without losing the features of that landscape we adored. Because water is scarce during Idaho summers, and not willing to maintain a green lawn or a lot of thirsty plants, we opted to play up one of the abundant features of our little slice of desert—rock. With several loads of river rock delivered to our house and, after putting down plastic sheeting to hinder weed growth, we laid 15 to 20 feet of rock in front of and on one side of our house. The previous owner of our house had already made rock terraces in the hillside behind our house, so there was little work to be done there. On the remaining side, which is the approach to our house from the driveway, we removed some sagebrush, constructed a path from driveway to door with flat stones we had collected over the years on road trips, and made a “dry river bed” next to the path using small river rocks and other treasures discovered on hikes.

With the infrastructure of our defensible space complete, our annual fire prevention tasks now typically consist of removing dry stalks from the sagebrush and other shrubs in the spring and keeping the wild grasses that grow here and there in our yard cropped in the summer.

We are confident that our house can survive a wildfire, but the modifications we’ve made are only a small part of why we’re more comfortable with life in the interface. We’ve gained the most by serving as volunteer firefighters in our community and coordinating Wilderness Ranch’s *Firewise* Communities/USA efforts. Our wildland fire training has helped us understand fire behavior, and that knowledge has helped us anticipate what might go wrong on a bad day, and what we can do to protect ourselves and our property in a worst-case scenario. Through *Firewise*, we’ve been able to extend our knowledge to our neighbors and help them understand that they can take measures to protect their homes without sacrificing the natural beauty that made them choose to live here in the first place.

When I consider the worst thing that could happen if Wilderness Ranch were in the path of a wildfire, I remember how it felt that day in 1994 when our community was being threatened by fire, and we weren’t prepared to help. I never want to feel that



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way again, and, if I have anything to say about it, my neighbors will never feel helpless against wildfire, either.

Carrie Wiss is a resident of Wilderness Ranch in Boise, Idaho that is also a Firewise Communities/USA Recognized Community.

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