

Strong Partnerships and the Right Tools:

The Pre-wildfire Strategy of Fire Adapted Communities

BY PAM LESCHAK
WILDLAND URBAN INTERFACE PROGRAM
MANAGER, USDA FOREST SERVICE

Wildfires that threaten communities cost the nation millions of dollars every year through suppression costs and structural losses, and put property owners and firefighters in danger. There are no indications that development in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) will abate; in fact, trends indicate that retiring baby boomers may increase development in high wildfire risk areas.

Fire authorities are faced with growing development and the ever-increasing cost of protecting structures in the WUI. This risk greatly decreases if communities are prepared or adapted to accept fire as a natural part of the larger environmental landscape.

The Fire Adapted Communities effort combines tools available to address WUI fire issues with strong multi-jurisdictional collaborative partnerships before a fire starts. The tools make the partnerships stronger and the partnerships make the tools more effective.

The process is a proactive approach that concentrates on pre-fire strategy and action to reduce risks, and thus costs, rather than relying on suppression activities alone to protect communities after a wildfire starts.

Think of Fire Adapted Communities as an umbrella under which exist the goals, the elements, the programs and tools, the partnerships and the processes needed to enable communities to reduce risk from wildfire.

Let's discuss each of the concepts collected under this umbrella to illustrate how they can become stronger by working together rather than standing alone.

The Goals:

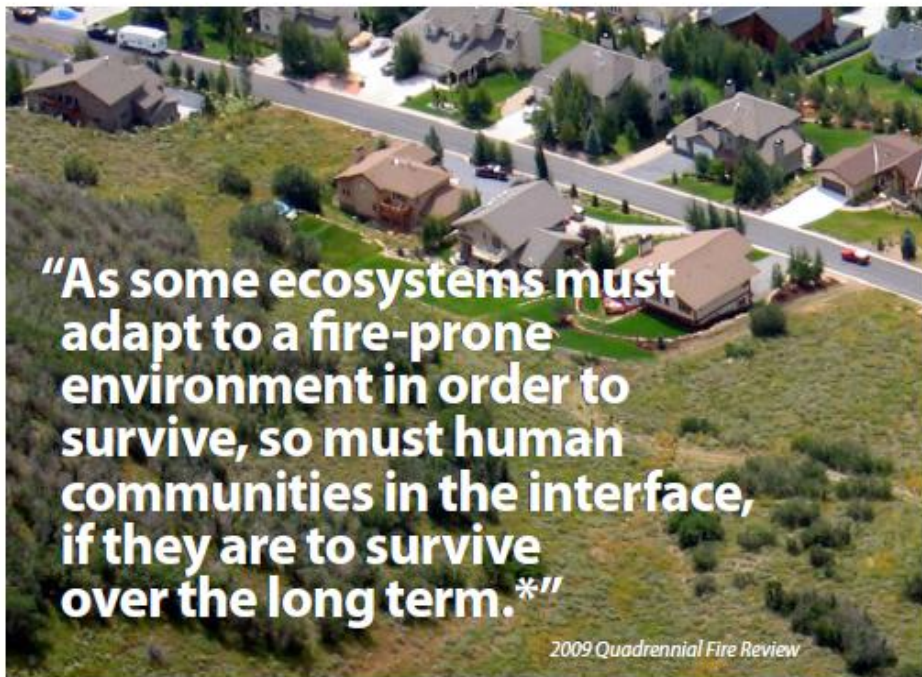
Reduce risk from wildfire in at-risk communities in the WUI, reduce damage due to wildfire and reduce fire suppression and structural protection costs without compromising firefighter or civilian safety.

The Elements:

- Residents possess the knowledge, skills, and willingness to properly prepare their homes before a wildfire threatens, prepare to evacuate and safely evacuate when necessary.
- Local fire suppression forces have the needed skills, equipment and capacity.
- Residents and the local fire agencies have met and understand the local fire suppression capability and related response expectations.
- Land owners are aware of fuel threats on their property and have taken action to mitigate the danger.

during, and after a fire. This is where educational programs like *Firewise* and *Ready, Set, Go!* play a role. These programs provide valuable information that helps people prepare their homes and families for the threat of wildfire and learn to evacuate, so they can safely escape the fire.

- Public expectations are realistic and are not based on reliance of government to provide all of the answers.
 - * Individuals accept personal responsibility for their property.
 - * The public understands that fire authorities cannot provide protection for every structure



- Structures are designed, constructed, retrofitted, and maintained in a manner that is ignition resistant.
- The community has embraced the need for defensible space by creating fuel reduction zones and internal safety zones, where treatments have been properly spaced, sequenced, and maintained over the long term.
- Local government has implemented effective land use planning and regulation, including building codes and local ordinances.
- Property owners have an understanding of their responsibilities before,

affected during a wildfire; and understands that it is dangerous for firefighters to attempt to protect a structure where owners have not taken the appropriate measures to make it defensible.

The Tools:

Include, but are not limited to: *Firewise*, or similar programs; community wildfire protection plans; *Ready, Set, Go!*; external fuels buffers; internal safety zones; fire departments with the capacity to mitigate, educate, and protect a community at risk; codes and ordinances that address wildfire threats; prevention and education programs; appropriate forest management and fuels mitigation efforts; and

cooperative fire agreements.

The Partners:

All state, federal, and local government agencies and non-government groups with a stake in protecting communities from wildfire. Partners such as the National Fire Protection Association, the USDA Forest Service, U.S. Department of Interior agencies, National Association of State Foresters, Institute for Business & Home Safety, International Association of Fire Chiefs, U.S. Fire Administration, and many, many more. Local partners like Rotary Clubs, neighborhood associations, conservation groups, and schools are equally valuable in this effort.

Wildfire knows no boundaries and neither

partnerships, with shared responsibility held by all stakeholders of the wildland fire problem, will create well-prepared, fire adapted communities and healthy, resilient landscapes." USDA Forest Service Deputy Chief for State and Private Forestry Jim Hubbard echoed that commitment to collaboration saying, "A commitment by governments, community organizations, and citizens to work together is necessary to address wildland fire. Everyone has a stake in this issue."

The Process:

A community is fire adapted if it has taken action to reduce risk; the more actions the community has taken, the more fire adapted it becomes.



HOME-TO-HOME IGNITION, AS A RESULT OF BURNING EMBERS, CONTRIBUTED TO THE DEVASTATION IN THIS SAN DIEGO, CALIF., NEIGHBORHOOD AS A RESULT OF THE WITCH CREEK WILDFIRE IN OCTOBER 2007.

does the response to wildfire. The successful Fire Adapted Communities process depends on strong and collaborative partnerships between state, federal, and local authorities. Those partnerships aren't limited to government entities, but extend to a wide variety of community groups that have a stake in the safety of their communities.

Arizona State Forester, Vicki Christiansen, speaking to the U.S. House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies on behalf of the National Association of State Foresters put it best: "Our work builds on the vision that effective part-

The Fire Adapted Communities process or track involves making a commitment to reducing risk. Many communities are already on track because they have taken local responsibility to reduce their risk. Each step along the way leads WUI communities to reduced risk. Each partner in the process has to fulfill its role to move the community closer to becoming fully fire adapted.

A community steps onto the Fire Adapted Communities track when they do any of the following:

- Perform pre-fire mitigation through fuels treatments in the WUI, create a fuels buffer or halo around communities, and create safety zones inside communities at risk;
- Create defensible space using *Firewise, Take Responsibility, Living With Fire, Fire-Safe* or similar programs;
- Support regulations to guide development, building materials and location, and landscaping to mitigate fire damage;
- Educate the community using programs like *Ready, Set, Go!*, prevention teams, *Firewise* Modules, and the *Smokey Bear Wildfire Prevention Campaign*; or
- Assist in building and maintaining local capacity through training, cooperative agreements, the Federal Excess Property Program, and Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs).

These tools are most beneficial if implemented as a shared strategy that involves all jurisdictions and partners in the WUI. Conversely, fuels treatments on public property around at-risk communities will be of little value if private property owners do not address their fuels issues in their communities.

The Fire Adapted Communities concept is still an evolving process and it will take the collaboration of all stakeholders to achieve the needed comprehensive effort to reduce risk, and ultimately to save resources, lives and properties. **DSR**

* The *Quadrennial Fire Review* is a strategic assessment of fire agency policies and programs designed to anticipate future needs. The review is a joint effort of the five federal natural resource management agencies and their state, local and tribal partners in the wildland fire community. See: <http://www.nifc.gov/QFR/QFR2009Final.pdf>

For more information on defensible space go to www.Firewise.org, www.takeresponsibility.cafirealliance.com or www.livingwithfire.info.

Pam Leschak is the wildland urban interface program manager and the national Firewise coordinator with the USDA Forest Service, Fire and Aviation Management Division, at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho.