

Project Wildfire – Community level prevention and preparedness

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Abstract

Project Wildfire is a nationally recognized innovative program for wildfire loss mitigation that can be replicated around the world at the community level. Created by local ordinance, Project Wildfire is a 27-member Steering Committee dedicated to preventing losses as a result of wildfire. With committed sponsorship from both structural and wildland fire agencies, Project Wildfire is known for its successful programs and support. A small panel of Project Wildfire members will discuss 2006 outcomes with Community Wildfire Protection Plans as a result of the federal Healthy Forests Initiative and Healthy Forests Restoration Act. We will also present the extremely successful FireFree program and the tremendous successes of this award winning homeowner/community education program.

The panel will also share information about how Project Wildfire provides support to local agencies during major wildland fire events as well as ongoing efforts for defensible space education in the high-risk wildland urban interface. Attendees will learn valuable information about the Project Wildfire model for success and how they can replicate it at the community level.

Introduction

Project Wildfire is the organized result of a Deschutes County effort to create long-term wildfire mitigation strategies and provide for a disaster-resistant community. It has become the Local Coordinating Group (LCG) for Deschutes County that facilitates, educates, disseminates and maximizes community efforts towards effective fire planning and mitigation.

Deschutes County (population 165,000) is in the heart of Central Oregon, an area well known for its active wildfire season, challenging terrain and urban interface challenges. The Project Wildfire Steering Committee is comprised of twenty-seven representatives from private and public organizations, each with an interest in fire planning and the mitigation of wildfire.

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The mission of Project Wildfire is to prevent deaths, injuries, property loss, and environmental damage resulting from wildfires in Deschutes County.

Through its collaborative partnership approach and facilitation efforts, Project Wildfire has accomplished dozens of projects since its inception in 1999 that have led to a safer and more livable Deschutes County. Two of these projects include the completion of six Community Wildfire Protection Plans and the expansion of the tremendously successful FireFree program.

Community Wildfire Protection Plans

In 2003, the Congress passed historical bi-partisan legislation: the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA). This legislation directs federal agencies to collaborate with communities in developing a Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) which includes the identification and prioritization of areas needing hazardous fuels treatment. For the first time, communities have the opportunity to direct where federal agencies place their fuels reduction efforts. With a Community Wildfire Protection Plan in place, community groups can apply for federal grants to treat hazardous fuels and address special concerns to reduce the risk of catastrophic loss as a result of wildland fire.

In Deschutes County, Project Wildfire has facilitated six CWPPs that address community concerns in each of the populated areas within the county. Each area is unique in terms of vegetation, population and topographical considerations. Project Wildfire played an active role in bringing not only federal and state partners to the table to create these plans, but also concerned citizens from the neighborhoods and communities that are affected by the plan.

With six CWPPs now in place, each community group is now eligible for grant funding to support the hazardous fuels reduction goals of each CWPP. Each group is now active in pursuing fuels reduction and educational activities to reduce the catastrophic risks of wildfire. Many groups are also addressing emergency evacuation needs within subdivisions that have only one way in or out. Through the funding available, these groups are treating roads for dust abatement, installing reflective signs for evacuation routes and mapping vegetation for future projects.

FireFree

With support from Project Wildfire and Safeco Insurance Company, the FireFree project was created in Central Oregon with the following objectives.

- Mitigate loss from wildfires through public education.
- Develop a program to promote wildfire safety.
- Change behaviors and attitudes towards wildfire.
- Involve residents in protecting their property and reducing their risk.

By encouraging homeowners to take responsibility for their own property, FireFree creates awareness and educates residents about the risks of wildfire to homes and property and the ten simple steps they should take to reduce those risks.

Those ten steps are:

- 1) Define defensible space – a minimum of 30 feet around home.
- 2) Reduce flammable vegetation - use fire resistive landscaping.
- 3) Remove or prune trees in wooded areas.
- 4) Cut grass and weeds regularly.
- 5) Move wood piles and other combustibles away from structures.
- 6) Keep roof and yard clean.
- 7) Make it easy with visible signs and access for firefighters.
- 8) Replace combustible wood shake roofs with fire resistant roofing.
- 9) Recycle yard debris and branches.
- 10) Know what to do when wildfire strikes.

Homeowners who complete the ten FireFree steps see an immediate reduction in potential structural loss to their own property and contribute to the reduction of potential wildfire spread in their neighborhoods and surrounding natural environments.

As an incentive for homeowners to create defensible space, the program offers FireFree Clean Up Days in the spring, prior to wildfire season. Residents bring unlimited quantities of yard debris to county recycle sites for free. FireFree and Project Wildfire partners staff the drop-off stations making contact with residents to further educate them about the FireFree steps.

In the past, the debris was chipped and mulched on site and distributed throughout Central Oregon on lawns and gardens as part of a biomass recycling program that reduces the threat of escaped debris burns.

Thanks to the overwhelming success of the Clean Up Days, the program collects in excess of 33,000 cubic yards of debris. Our recycling partners are no longer able to recycle the debris into mulch due to the sheer amount collected. Through strategic planning efforts and the dedication of our recycle partners, the collected debris is now being utilized as biomass fuel to create clean energy for use in Oregon.

FireFree has evolved into a year-long comprehensive program that utilizes a number of tools to deliver the FireFree message to homeowners. The media campaign for FireFree is the largest component of the project and includes printed, radio and TV advertising and the www.firefree.org website. While the media blitz is a necessary element for the success of the program, the continued increase in awareness is also the result of the strong cooperative effort between Project Wildfire, the Central Oregon Fire Prevention Cooperative, local fire departments, state and federal forestry departments, individual businesses and the insurance industry.

The facilitation of Community Wildfire Protection Plans and the FireFree program are just two of the model successes of Project Wildfire. Relying on the collective intelligence and partnerships of the Steering Committee, Project Wildfire is able to affect attitudes and behavior changes of residents toward wildfire.