

Firewise Communities®: A Model of Local Initiative and Cooperation

April 2007

National Firewise Communities® Program



Firewise Communities® is a national interagency program that plays a critical role in areas outside the jurisdiction of government entities: private land in the wildland/urban interface (WUI). Through its facilitation

and information resources, the national Firewise Communities program has been a model of cooperation among federal, tribal, state, and local government; private industry; nonprofit 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.

Approach to Motivating Change

Agencies and organizations responsible for wildland fire management agree: we can reduce loss of lives, property, and 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 to achieving it. Rather than prescribing a national 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.

Firewise encourages community representatives, including home owners, to develop their own plan for achieving a set of common goals with guidance from land management and fire officials. The most successful wildfire mitigation programs are driven by the individuals who will be most impacted by their efforts: the residents.

"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."

-Jim Smalley, Manager of the National Firewise Communities Program

Firewise Success Stories

Saddle Ridge, Texas

Of the many fires that occurred in the State of Texas in late 2005 and early 2006, one in particular stands out. Jan Fulkerson of the Texas Forest Service stated, "One of our (Firewise) communities had a nearby brush fire with flame heights nearly six to eight feet in height and quickly approaching homes. Firewise efforts by homeowners to mow grass some 50-feet out from their properties before the fire saved their homes." By creating a defensible space around their home flame heights were reduced to half and became manageable to extinguish. The value of three homes and several outbuildings that were protected from the fire was estimated at \$836,000.

The incident occurred in Saddle Ridge, a community of 211 home sites located in steep rolling terrain of heavy oak and cedar outside of Wimberley, Texas.

NWCG Wildland/Urban Interface Working Team

The national Firewise Communities program is directed by the National Wildfire Coordinating Group's Wildland/Urban Interface Working Team. Members include:

- USDA Forest Service
- U.S. Department of the Interior
- Federal Emergency Management Agency
- International Association of Fire Chiefs
- National Association of State Fire Marshals
- National Emergency Management Association
- National Fire Protection Association
- U.S. Fire Administration
- State forestry organizations



Firewise Communities/USA Recognition Program



Firewise Communities/USA provides a framework for America's fire-prone communities to work together with local fire and land management officials to develop and implement a wildfire mitigation plan, and recognizes them for their efforts. Firewise Communities/USA is administered with assistance from 40 state forestry liaisons and two regional Bureau

of Indian Affairs liaisons. Following is a list of program criteria:

- Enlist a WUI specialist to complete a hazard assessment and work together to create a plan to be implemented by the community.
- Organize Firewise board/committee that includes homeowners and fire officials. Participation by planners, land managers, urban foresters, and/or members of other interest groups is also encouraged.
- Observe a Firewise Communities/USA Day dedicated to a local Firewise project.
- Invest a minimum of \$2.00 per capita annually in local Firewise projects.
- Submit an annual report that documents continuing compliance with the program.



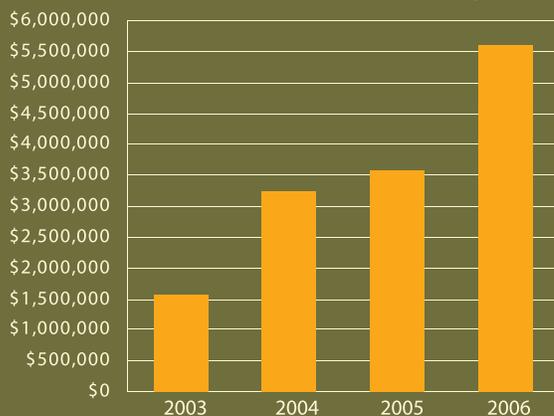
As of April 2007, more than 235 communities in 34 states have earned Firewise Communities/USA recognition



New Mexico: Colfax County
Colfax County, New Mexico, located in the northeastern section of the state, has been recognized as having the first "Coalition of Firewise Communities"

in the nation. Leaders have worked closely with their communities as well as many other organizations in the county to educate and guide them in understanding the Firewise program. Efforts in Colfax County have prompted several communities to take the necessary steps to become recognized as part of the Firewise Communities/USA program, and neighboring counties in New Mexico and Colorado have started to follow their lead. But as much as county officials and the Forest Service can play a role in informing residents about the Firewise Communities/USA program and adopting countywide standards for neighborhoods to follow, it is really the residents who spearhead the effort and keep it sustainable.

Community Investment in Firewise Communities/USA Grows Every Year



Firewise Communities Partnerships

The national Firewise Communities program recognizes the importance of partnering with other organizations that share similar interests, working with them to develop that speak to the needs of their constituencies. For example, the American Planning Association has explored Firewise concepts in its publication *Planning for Wildfires*, aimed at the nation's professional planners. It explores the role of wildfire hazard mitigation and land use planning in reducing the potential for losses as a result of wildfires. The Association's Research Division has surveyed Firewise Workshop participants to evaluate the impact of the workshop series, and its Annual Conference has welcomed Firewise at a forum where the program can reach over 6,000 participants each year.

Information Resources

The online Firewise Catalog offers more than 30 audiovisual and print items for agencies, homeowners, landscape architects, community planners, builders and developers and others. New resources are continually being developed and added to the catalog. More than 909,614 pieces of literature have been distributed since the introduction of the online ordering center in May 2003.