



Firewise Communities™: A Model of Local Initiative and Cooperation

August 2005

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 between 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 it’s 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

Hawaii:

This August, wildfire swept through 25,000 acres in Hawaii, and the fire burned up to the sidewalk leading to one Waikoloa village. But Waikoloa residents were prepared: A team of residents had cleared a 30-foot firebreak during a Firewise Communities workday a month before the fire started.

“The fire jumped every fuel break, six of them, except for the one the Firewise Communities committee cleared,” said Denise Laitinen, Hawaii Firewise Communities Coordinator.

The village was saved because residents used Firewise Communities practices and because of the tremendous support from the Hawaii County Fire Department, Laitinen said. The fire chief went door to door and asked homeowners if they wanted a Firewise assessment. The Firewise Communities committee in Waikoloa is continuing its workshop series through the fall.

Workshops:

More than 10,000 individuals participated in more than 30 national, state, and local Firewise Communities workshops between 1999 and 2003, including representatives from more than 1,080 communities in 47 states. A 2003 survey by the American Planning Association reported that most survey respondents had taken one or more of the listed actions within a year of attending a Firewise Communities workshop, including: disseminating information (83%), conducting community planning activities (79%), conducting Firewise programmatic activities (65%).

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.



More than 100 communities in 29 states have earned Firewise Communities/USA recognition to date.



Florida: Wedgefield

Since the community of Wedgefield in Orange County, Fla., began its Firewise Communities/USA assessment in 2000, the number of participants increases every year.

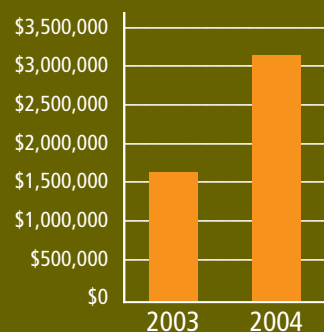
Mary Prescott, a member of the Firewise Board in Wedgefield, feels successful when she sees her neighbors working to bring their homes up to Firewise standards.

"I know the program is working when I drive by my neighbors' house and they have cleared 30 feet of defensible space around their home," Prescott said.

The Firewise Communities/USA program has been so successful, it attracted the attention of a local builder, who designed and built a model home reflecting Firewise Communities and Federal Alliance for Safe Homes standards.

The Firewise Board in Wedgefield is a model of partnership, working with nine agency partners at the county, state, and federal levels.

Community Investment in Firewise Communities/USA Grows Every Year



Communities have invested more than \$4.8 million in Firewise Communities/USA projects since 2003.

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 programs that speak to the needs of their constituencies. For example, Firewise principles are now part of the criteria for the National Arbor Day Foundation's Building with Trees program. As part of this partnership, Firewise information has reached more than 1,100 individuals through Building with Trees seminars and Building for Greener Communities conferences. In addition, NADF has included the Firewise logo and Web site address in more than 270,000 promotional brochures, 15,000 guidebooks, and ads in *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today*.

Information Resources

The online Firewise Catalog offers more than 30 audiovisual and print items for agencies, fire fighters, homeowners, and others free of charge, and continues to develop new resources. More than 635,000 pieces of literature, including pamphlets, books, flyers, videos, and CDs have been distributed since the introduction of the online ordering center in May 2003.