

Hazards Caucus Alliance Fact Sheet

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WILDFIRES



The Yellowstone wildfire of 1988 burned about one million acres and threatened the town of West Yellowstone, Montana. *Photograph by Jim Smalley, NFPA*

SOME WILDFIRE FACTS

The U.S. experiences about 97,000 wildland fire starts per year, based on the latest 10-year average (1995-2004), involving 4.9 million acres annually.

In 2000, 7.5 million acres burned in the U.S., an area about the size of Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Delaware combined.

Federal agency wildfire suppression costs exceed \$1.6 billion per year.

According to FEMA, nine out of ten wildfires are caused by people. Lightning is a significant natural cause.

THE WILDLAND URBAN INTERFACE (WUI)

The WUI is an area where development blends with undeveloped vegetative fuels.

Wildlands include forests, grasslands, wetlands, shrubs and transitional lands.

About 33% of the U.S. is forested and about 67% of that area is commercial forest.

According to the USDA Forest Service, there are 22,000 "at risk" communities located in the WUI.

Wildfires are unplanned events that can cause the loss of lives and property. They include escaped prescribed burns, human-induced fires and fires ignited by natural causes.

Most wildfires start on state or federally owned land and are extinguished while still relatively small. The 3% of wildfires that do escape early detection and suppression account for 95% of the fire-related costs, damages and home losses.

Annual wildfire losses, including building destruction and declines in lumber production and tourism, cost the federal government and insurance companies billions of dollars.

After a wildfire there is a greater risk of subsequent landslides where burned hills and mountains have weakened soils that are more likely to erode rapidly in normal to heavy rainfall.

AFTER THE FIRE

- Hydrologists, geologists, soil scientists, range managers, botanists, engineers, archaeologists and foresters assess site damage and begin the rehabilitation process.
- Water erosion must be controlled in places void of vegetation to prevent landslides.
- Vegetation must be monitored to prevent invasive species from taking over the vulnerable site.
- The help of federal agencies, the community and specialists is vital to the full restoration of the site.

MAINTAINING A FIRE-RESISTANT HOME IN THE WUI

- Use heat-and flame-resistant construction materials.
- Remove any flammable materials, especially firewood and vegetation, from within 30 feet of the home.
- Dispose of branches and grasses in accordance with local regulations.
- Be sure that emergency responders and their vehicles have clear access to the home.
- Ensure that address numbers and street signs are clearly visible and easy to read.

FEDERAL AGENCIES INVOLVED

National Fire Plan

<http://www.forestsandrangelands.gov/>

National Interagency Fire Center

www.nifc.gov

U.S. Department of Agriculture

Forest Service: www.fs.fed.us

U.S. Department of the Interior

Bureau of Land Management: www.blm.gov

National Park Service: www.nps.gov

Bureau of Indian Affairs: www.bia.gov

Fish & Wildlife Service: www.fws.gov

U.S. Geological Survey: www.usgs.gov

U.S. Department of Homeland Security

FEMA: www.fema.gov

USFA: www.usfa.dhs.gov

U.S. Department of Commerce



An example of a fire resistant community in Waikoloa, Hawaii, where potential damage from a wildfire was averted by wise planning and preparation.

Photograph by Hawaii Division of Forestry and Wildlife



A debris flow, generated from hill slopes burned by the South Canyon fire of 1994, crossed four lanes of Interstate 70 and nearly dammed the Colorado River. *Photograph by Jim Scheidt, BLM.*

PREPARING A COMMUNITY WILDLAND PROTECTION PLAN

The process of developing a CWPP can help a community clarify and refine its priorities for the protection of life, property, and critical infrastructure in the wildland–urban interface. It also can lead community members through valuable discussions regarding management options and implications for the surrounding watershed.

Eight Steps to a CWPP

Step 1: Convene Decision makers

- Form a core team made up of representatives from the appropriate local governments, local fire authority, and state agency responsible for forest management.

Step 2: Involve Federal Agencies

- Identify and engage local representatives of the USFS and BLM.
- Contact and involve other land management agencies as appropriate.

Step 3: Engage Interested Parties

- Contact and encourage active involvement in plan development from a broad range of interested organizations and stakeholders.

Step 4: Establish a Community Base Map

- Work with partners to establish a baseline map of the community that defines the community's WUI and displays inhabited areas at risk, forested areas that contain critical human infrastructure, and forest areas at risk for large-scale fire disturbance.

Step 5: Develop a Community Risk Assessment

- Work with partners to develop a community risk assessment that considers fuel hazards; risk of wildfire occurrence; homes, businesses, and essential infrastructure at risk; other community values at risk; and local preparedness capability.
- Rate the level of risk for each factor and incorporate into the base map as appropriate.

Step 6: Establish Community Priorities & Recommendations

- Use the base map and community risk assessment to facilitate a collaborative community discussion that leads to the identification of local priorities for fuel treatment, reducing structural ignitability, and other issues of interest, such as improving fire response capability.
- Clearly indicate whether priority projects are directly related to protection of communities and essential infrastructure or to reducing wildfire risks to other community values.

Step 7: Develop an Action Plan and Assessment Strategy

- Consider developing a detailed implementation strategy to accompany the CWPP, as well as a monitoring plan that will ensure its long-term success.

Step 8: Finalize Community Wildfire Protection Plan

- Finalize the CWPP and communicate the results to community and key partners.

For a complete electronic version of the handbook, go to http://www.safnet.org/publications/cwpp_oct08.pdf

The **Congressional Hazards Caucus** is co-chaired by Senators Mary Landrieu (LA), Ben Nelson (NE), and Lisa Murkowski (AK) and Representatives Dennis Moore (KS), Jo Bonner (AL) and Zoe Lofgren (CA). The goal of the Caucus is to provide ways to help individuals, businesses, and communities better prepare for and mitigate the costs of disasters. The Caucus seeks to foster an important dialogue on steps that government and citizens can take to lessen the severity of these disasters. For more information visit www.hazardscaucus.org.