

The Bend Community & FireFree Steps to Improve Community Preparedness for Wildfire

Community Preparedness Case Study Series

Case Study #2

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Bend, Deschutes County, Oregon

In central Oregon's high desert lies a gem of a city whose environmental amenities and outdoor recreation opportunities steadily attract new residents and businesses. The surrounding forests once supported two mills, but even in the 1930s Bend recognized its recreational potential and began to develop its now abundant retail, tourist, and high-tech employment opportunities. The city of Bend, population 52,000, and Deschutes County, population 115,000, are two of the fastest growing places in the State. Among the challenges posed to planners and elected officials by such rapid growth is the expansion of homes and residential subdivisions into forested areas, jeopardizing the ability of fire crews to balance risks to forests and homes.



Until the mid- to late-1800s the forests of central Oregon were thinned by low-intensity wildfires, creating an old-growth ponderosa pine forest with little undergrowth. In our time, fire suppression has interrupted the 5- to 10-year fire recurrence intervals and dramatically increased the number of trees and underbrush. Two recent fires—the 1990 Awbrey Hall Fire which burned 3,000 acres and 19 homes, and the 1996 Skeleton Fire which burned 17,000 acres and 21 homes—brought home the reality of wildfire to the city of Bend.

FireFree—The Spark that Ignites Wildfire Preparedness in Bend

The SAFECO Insurance Company covered significant losses incurred in the 1990 and 1996 fires. They recognized that something could be done to reduce future losses and offered seed money to increase fire protection in the area. Bend's fire marshal suggested a public education campaign; a marketing company was hired, and FireFree was born.

FireFree builds on many of Bend's strengths. A diverse community with a number of highly skilled individuals and strong leadership, Bend has a number of connected and active civic organizations. Neighborhoods and subdivisions range from mobile homes and small houses to destination resorts and gated communities with homes around private golf courses. FireFree recognizes this diversity and builds upon the city's existing organizational networks to bring an array of messages to the different homeowners.



Federal agencies manage 85% of the land in Deschutes County; their personnel have developed an exhaustive knowledge of the region's fire ecology. As early participants in FireFree, they recognize the importance of coordinating efforts to reduce risk of wildfire on private and public lands. They also see FireFree as an opportunity to work productively with the public as stewards of natural resources.

FireFree Public Education and Outreach Program

At the core of FireFree is the belief that individuals can make a difference—that homeowners can take steps to reduce their risks from wildfire. Most of the “ten tips” for “getting in the zone” and reducing wildfire risk relate to creating defensible space, reducing vegetation, clearing brush around homes, and treating or replacing roof covering. Emergency preparation measures are also suggested. FireFree delivers its message via the media, a public speakers bureau, and educational materials provided by businesses or distributed door to door.

FireFree conducts an annual spring campaign that leads to three cleanup weekends when the county landfills invite residents to recycle their yard debris at no cost. Local fire and land management agencies provide volunteers and equipment. Grants help neighborhoods rent chippers, hang banners, and provide refreshments—whatever it takes to get everyone involved. Participation has grown each year, and now other landfills in the county are following suit.



What's Next for Bend and Deschutes County?

FireFree is still evolving. Currently it is sustained through Project Impact, a county program funded by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for overall disaster preparedness. Project Impact continues to promote homeowner responsibility and cleanup weekends. In addition, it provides information about fire-resistant landscaping and promotes retrofitting fire-prone roofs and siding with safer building products. Working at the community level, Project Impact gained an emergency egress route for a subdivision over a railroad and supported emergency measures such as signage and checklists. It has partnered with the High Desert Museum for a lecture series on fire ecology and on-site fuels modification projects. The demonstration Wind, Earth, and Fire project will reduce the threat of wildfire to the museum and bring the message of wildfire prevention to local visitors and thousands of tourists visiting the museum. Project Impact is also working with Central Oregon Partnerships for Wildfire Risk Reduction to identify potential markets for the small-diameter materials resulting from forest thinning projects.



FireFree and Project Impact will work to expand participation in the annual cleanup days and help neighborhoods raise funds for fire safety projects. Ongoing assessments evaluate how many people are participating and what obstacles may deter those who are not. Reaching newcomers unaware of the historical significance of fire and absentee landowners with fewer community ties will continue to be a challenge. The environmental ethic so strongly shared by residents may be key.

FireFree is catching the interest of communities throughout the State, and the Oregon Department of Forestry, with the help of SAFECO and a National Fire Plan grant, is facilitating adoption of its materials.

Wildfire Preparedness Lessons for Other Communities from FireFree



1. Make your message accessible and prevention strategies simple.
2. Use homeowner associations and other existing networks to reach individuals.
3. Highlight civic responsibility through special events such as cleanup days.
4. Rely on existing partnerships to create and sustain the effort.

5. Turn to the county and Federal agencies for help and resources.
6. Call on local professionals and businesses within the community to help get out the word.
7. Capitalize on one success to attract support for another.



8. Recognize that a diversity of neighborhoods requires a range of possible actions—give individuals options for action and peer pressure.
9. Be patient but persistent—just as it took time to build up the fuel levels in the forests, it will take time to build awareness and capacity of homeowners to protect themselves.
10. Don't rest on your laurels. Keep the leadership diverse, the message fresh, and outreach broad.
11. It will burn—fire is an essential element of this ecosystem. Challenge residents to prepare themselves and property.

Web Sites for More Information on Bend and FireFree

City of Bend: www.ci.bend.or.us

Deschutes and Ochoco National Forests: www.fs.fed.us/r6/centraloregon

Deschutes County Rural Fire Protection District #2: www.dcrfpd2.com/dcrfpd/home.htm

FireFree: www.firefree.org

Project Impact: www.deschutesimpact.org

High Desert Museum: www.highdesert.org

Oregon Department of Forestry: www.odf.state.or.us

Oregon State University Extension publication "Fire-Resistant Plants for Oregon Home Landscapes":
extension.orst.edu/deschutes/FireResPlants02.pdf

Logos are from the FireFree, Project Impact, and Bureau of Land Management Web sites. Unless otherwise noted, all photos are by Victoria Sturtevant, Southern Oregon University.

The Wildfire Preparedness Project of the National Fire Plan

Communities across the U.S. have voiced increasing concern about how they can better prepare for wildfire. Even in areas of the country not traditionally thought of as having high fire risk, storms, changing climate, and pest/disease outbreaks have increased concern about the potential for catastrophic fire. In areas where fire is viewed as a natural part of the ecosystem, the fact that more and more people choose these places to live means that there is a potential for major fire impacts. A team of scientists funded by the National Fire Plan have been visiting communities across the country to identify the activities communities are undertaking to increase wildfire preparedness and to identify the resources necessary to support these activities. The project is led by the North Central Research Station, in cooperation with the Pacific Northwest Research Station, University of Florida, University of Minnesota, and Southern Oregon University.

This is one in a series of summaries reflecting findings of the case studies. Hard copies of this summary can be obtained from the individuals listed below. All case study summaries currently available can be found on the Web at:

www.ncrs.fs.fed.us/4803/Highlights.htm

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