

Evacuees Star in Local Film Remake

NOTHING MAKES A VIDEO ABOUT WILDFIRE PROTECTION more popular than a wildfire in your own backyard.

It makes for good footage, too.

Those were some of the lessons learned when the Jackson/Teton County Fire Department in Wyoming remade its own educational video in 2001–2002, *A Homeowner's Guide to Wildland Fire Protection*.

But those lessons were not the only ones learned.

Bringing it all back home

The Jackson Hole region in western Wyoming is surrounded by some of the largest areas of undisturbed forests and wilderness in the lower 48 states. Mixed in among that sprawling wilderness are approximately 1,500 homes, ranging in value from \$150,000 to \$10 million, as well as some large commercial tracts.

“We’ve had a wildland/urban interface problem here for about a million years,” says Rusty Palmer, fire marshal and deputy county fire warden.

Concern about the problem prompted the fire department to make a wildfire mitigation video in the early 1990s. Palmer likes using video to get across the mitigation message.

“There are a lot of ways to get your message out that are less expensive,” he says. “There aren’t a lot of ways to get your message out there that are better. It’s visual. It’s auditory. It’s redundant. People can play it over and over. It really hits home with folks.”

However, by 2000 there were problems with the 30-minute video made almost 10 years earlier. It opened with footage of a large Minnesota fire, and included about 18 minutes of footage produced by the National Fire Protection Association in the early 1980s, sandwiched between segments shot in a studio with local residents. The transitions were not smooth and the people and techniques looked outdated.

“The message was OK, but it had things about cheatgrass in Nevada. It was hard for local folks to latch on to,” Palmer says. The

department decided to make another, more up-to-date and localized video about wildfire mitigation for homeowners.

The first step in making a new and up-to-date video was to make a new and up-to-date budget. The first video cost only \$3,500. The new one was budgeted (and completed) for \$25,000. Of that amount, \$15,000 came from local sources.

The fire department began accumulating funds for the project over several years in a wildland fire account. “We knew we were going to make it, so we started budgeting a long time ago,” Palmer says. “It was a normal evolution for us.”

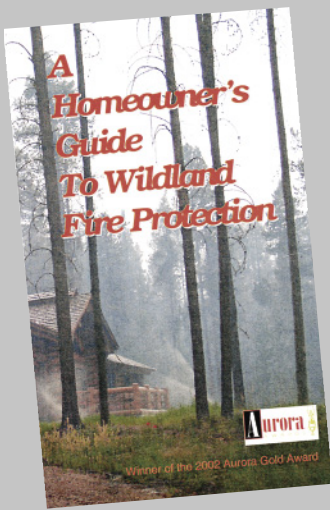
Additional local funds came from Teton County and the town of Jackson, and as in-kind donations from the Jackson Hole Chamber of Commerce, Movie Works Theatres and the fire department. A \$10,000 grant from the Western States Wildland/Urban Interface Grant Program provided the balance.

The second step was the decision to take a “down-home” approach to the new video. By emphasizing local people and places, viewers in the area would see faces they knew and settings they lived in, to bring home the message that they needed to take action in their own backyards. While celebrities are numerous in the area, the department decided not to use any in the video.

The third step was the careful process of choosing a filmmaker. Candidates were required to submit a proposal and three work samples to be carefully reviewed by a panel of four department members.

Panel members included Palmer, who was involved in the making of the original video and was accustomed to viewing videos for their public education value. Another panel member was a trainer and division chief who was accustomed to viewing videos for their instructional value. The other two panel members did not have specifically video-related backgrounds.

“I was glad that we got them to submit at least three pieces of work,” Palmer says. “It



gave us a general sense of what they would be able to accomplish.”

The panel decided to make the video 30 minutes long. Shooting would start in 2001 and the video would be delivered early in 2002. Cost was a concern, but was not pre-eminent.

Perhaps most important, the panel reacted to the quality of the finished product in the sample films they reviewed. In addition to technical quality, panel members were concerned about “whether or not the film touched them, made sense,” Palmer says. “We wanted to make sure the overriding message was understood.”

The department received bids from three filmmakers, and settled on SavaFilm, a local production company whose samples demonstrated what Palmer calls a “good sense of content.” Sava Malachowski, the chief cameraman for SavaFilm, had already proceeded to get a firefighting red card after submitting the bid. The card would allow him access to shoot on the fire lines at wildfires or controlled burns if any occurred in the area.

Palmer says that other than Malachowski and the video crew, the project initially met with more apathy than resistance from the community.

That soon changed.

Fire was the unexpected star

The company was about one-third of the way into production when the Green Knoll Fire broke out just five miles from Jackson on July 22, 2001. The fire proceeded to burn for days, threatening hundreds of homes and causing nearly 200 evacuations as it consumed 4,470 acres.

“With the Green Knoll, we completely changed what we were doing,” Palmer says. “The whole emphasis of the film changed.”

One change was the focus on a large local fire that provided an inarguable demonstration of wildfire risk. “Fortunately, the filmmaker was red carded so he was able to get a lot of

dramatic footage,” Palmer points out. “That was a value-added benefit.”

In addition, the occurrence of an actual fire enabled the filmmakers to incorporate stirring interviews with local people who had been evacuated because their homes were surrounded by fire, and who could testify what it felt like to face the prospect of losing their homes to wildfire. “That was a piece we hadn’t even thought about until we started talking to them and hearing their stories,” Palmer says.

The fire also changed the attitude of local people toward the video project itself. Palmer recalls, “The minute Jackson Hole was on fire, they were asking, ‘When’s the film going to be done?’”

Ironically, the fire department’s initial project proposal itself had stated, “Clearly one of the strongest attitudes to overcome in prevention activities is an ‘it won’t happen to me’ attitude. Few people building within the interface think about the potential for wildfire before they build. Many think about it only after a local catastrophe or near miss. The impact of people seeing the aftermath of interface fires does have an effect.”

Point made.



Jackson/Teton County
Fire Marshall Rusty
Palmer



Sava Malachowski and
Valerie Schramm of
Savafilm

▶ Bill Nash and his house were featured in Savafilm's "A Homeowner's Guide to Wildland Fire Protection"



And the envelope please . . .

Topics covered in the completed instructional documentary — formatted for VHS video — include the wildland fire problem in Teton County and the United States, basics of fire behavior, choosing a wise location for structures, home design and building materials, creating a survivable landscape and creating a space that can be defended by firefighters.

The new video includes a few clips of footage shot elsewhere in the country, but

even those clips generally appear as if they could have been shot in Wyoming.

Thirty people appear in the video — counting homeowners, wildfire experts and others — and most are from Teton County. The local people, the local settings, the footage of the searing local fire and the interviews with those who had feared losing their homes all work together to make a powerful message that fire mitigation starts here, and now.

Despite the fire-induced changes, the video came in within budget and essentially on time. Scheduled for completion in February, the video actually premiered in April. It came out right at the start of the 2002 fire season, a prime time to begin mitigation efforts.

Palmer says the most important part of the distribution plan was saturation of the local market. Reaching homeowners' associations was relatively easy, he says, because the fire department had an existing relationship with them.

"They have private water supplies we like to use, so we're in touch with them at least once a year," he explains, adding the department used an existing mailing list for sending a copy of the video to each association. In addition, he says the department presented programs to six or seven of the organizations.

Local distribution also included public venues, particularly libraries. Copies were made available for rent at local video stores, but Palmer says people did not seem interested in renting it, perhaps because they could borrow it at no cost from the library or purchase their own copies for \$5.

The fire department showed the video to businesses and presented it in schools, along with similarly targeted presentations on topics like the psychology behind teenage arson and fire safety in kitchens.

They got more than 30 follow-up calls in less than one year from people who had seen the film and wanted additional help in reducing their risks.





By the end of January 2003, the fire department had distributed 500 copies of *A Homeowner's Guide to Wildland Fire Protection*.

The video has been distributed throughout the state and is available on request to callers. It has been broadcast statewide on Wyoming Public Television and was shown twice during the 2003 National Fire Plan Conference in New Orleans, a federal/state/local conference that works on implementing the national strategy for managing wildfires. The conference was attended by 400.

In addition, *A Homeowner's Guide to Wildland Fire Protection* won an Aurora Gold Award in an international independent film and video competition for its creativity, message effectiveness and technical excellence.

Palmer says even though people are more likely to lose their homes to a structural fire, they are more fearful of wildfire — and the video provides an opportunity for firefighters to educate people about wildfire mitigation and reducing home fire danger. When members of the fire department present the video at meetings or visit a home to talk about risk reduction, they may also talk about such topics as wood stove safety and smoke detectors.

But the video is only one of an assortment of educational tools. The fire department uses personal visits, a PowerPoint presentation and literature that ranges from items to stick on a refrigerator to two handouts for homeowners — one on how to mitigate while building a

A few of the many homes deep in the forest near Jackson Hole



Valerie Schramm and
Sava Malachowski

home, the other on good maintenance for mitigation. The department also works with outside groups that help educate owners and help create defensible space.

Whenever firefighters make an educational visit to a home, Palmer says, “We go loaded with brochures. We may not have the opportunity to go back.”

Lessons learned

Along the way, Palmer discovered that filmmaking is a highly collaborative process that requires ample time for communication. “We spent a huge amount of time in discussion,” he says. “That was one of the things that caught me off-guard.”

If Palmer had it to do again, he says he would learn more about video production at the start. He had a “little epiphany” about the different views of a video held by filmmakers and firefighters. “I’m looking at it as a tool with a budget,” he explains. “They’re looking at it as a piece of art.”

He thought making a film was just about writing, shooting and editing, but he found

those elements to be just a small part of the process. Other important factors included the quality of light, excess noise in the area and the color of the background. He recalls editing sessions with Malachowski and director/writer/editor Valerie Schramm.

“We completely reorganized the film at one point,” Palmer says. “We looked at the first cut and it just didn’t seem to flow.” While he had not expected to spend so much time on the video, he is glad he did. “I’m 100 percent more educated and knowledgeable than I was before I started,” he says.

Malachowski agrees that good communication contributes greatly to the quality of the final video. “Filmmaking is a very collaborative process and the quality of a film is always a sum of inputs from everybody involved in it,” he says. “Finding time to communicate among various collaborators is very important.”

The effort put into the video is paying off in mitigation around Jackson Hole, according to Palmer. Homeowners in subdivisions threatened by the Green Knoll Fire are making changes. Those who participated in the film feel particularly compelled to take action. Residents who used to resist clearing trees because of their sentimental value, Palmer says, are now cutting trees.

He attributes much of the success of the video to the use of local people, the footage of the Green Knoll Fire, and particularly to the interviews with those whose homes had been threatened.

“I wanted local folks to hear the emotion in their voices,” he says. “It’s something we wouldn’t have had (without the fire). It anchored the credibility of the film by using those local folks who actually experienced it.”

Copies of *A Homeowner’s Guide to Wildland Fire Protection* are available in VHS format for \$8.20 each, which includes shipping, through the Jackson/Teton County Fire Department; P. O. Box 901; Jackson, WY 83001; (307) 733-4732. ■