

A Community Solution

Dynamic duo spark grassroots wildfire planning

ON A SUMMER DAY, thousands of visitors will make the short drive from Salt Lake City to Big Cottonwood Canyon to enjoy the rugged beauty of the mountains. The 17-mile stretch of Utah Highway 190 runs through the heart of the canyon and climbs east through thick stands of fir, aspen, spruce and pine, with Big Cottonwood Creek meandering alongside.

As one of approximately 500 people who live in Big Cottonwood Canyon year-round, Barbara Cameron has grown accustomed to the many summer visitors who come to the suburban canyon to picnic, camp, hike and bike. But she has had trouble getting used to another change that summer brings—fear of wildfire.

“Every July, August and September things get so tense up here you can feel it crackling in the air,” Cameron said. “We worry about fire until the first snow comes, then there is a collective sigh, even from the trees.”

Like many people who live in the wildland/urban interface, Cameron didn’t know that she could do anything more than spend the summer fearing the worst while hoping for the best—until she attended a Community Solutions wildfire preparation workshop conducted by Kathy Hammons and Janet Johnson.

Hammons and Johnson formed Community Solutions in July 2001 as a way to share their wildfire safety expertise. Hammons has a background in education and was involved in building the community wildfire plan in Sundance, Utah; Johnson worked for the U.S. Forest Service and later helped develop a statewide initiative called Utah Living with Fire.

“After Janet and I worked together to make Sundance the first community model for Utah Living with Fire, the state office of Forestry, Fire and State Lands gave us some seed money to see if we could develop a model that would fit other communities,” Hammons explained.

Since the first training session in October 2001, the state of Utah has contracted with Hammons and Johnson to bring Community Solutions to six additional sites, and so far more than 35 Utah communities have been through the workshops.

Cameron and six of her neighbors from Big Cottonwood Canyon attended a two-day session in October 2001, and they were joined by residents of other nearby communities. “The training was a wake-up call,” she said. “We have a lot of independent-minded people up here, but the wildfire issue galvanized the whole canyon.”

To Hammons and Johnson, finding the right people to attend the workshop is a critical part of the equation. In addition to agency representatives and firefighting professionals, they also want local “spark plugs” like Cameron who can help change a community’s culture.

“We start the process by identifying and training a local technical support person who can invite a good mix of community and agency people,” Hammons said. “During the workshop we look at the tools needed to build a sustainable community wildfire program. The local support person is there afterward to help the communities establish wildfire councils and complete their plans.”

Janet Johnson,
Community Solutions



Based on a combination of research, feedback from communities and work with a facilitator who helped Sundance during its initial fire forum, Hammons and Johnson isolated six basic elements of wildfire planning that form the core of the Community Solutions curriculum: fuel reduction, facilities and equipment, education, emergency response, regulative issues, and evaluation and maintenance.

“We ask everyone, ‘What do you wish you would have done before you smelled the smoke?’ and everything parks within those six areas,” Hammons said. “We have done this enough now where we know that if a community develops a plan that addresses those six areas it will be in pretty good shape.”

In Utah, there is an added incentive for communities to attend the training and develop a community wildfire plan: mitigation funding. According to Larry LeForte, a fire management officer for the Utah Department of Natural Resources, the state uses the training as a way to identify communities where funding from the National Fire Plan will have the most impact.

“We can write a grant specifically for a community based on what is submitted in its fire plan,” LeForte said. “We don’t have the resources to write community fire plans for everybody, and having them write their own and identify their own problems gives them ownership. We’ve found that it’s very difficult to get anything accomplished unless the community buys in.”

After the training the first item of business for the group from Big Cottonwood Canyon was to complete its wildfire plan, and it was then that Cameron recalled thinking, “We can do this.” Since then, the Big Cottonwood Canyon Wildfire Committee has continued to meet monthly—even during winter—and the community has made significant strides.

One particularly notable success was the development of a map that for the first



time provides emergency responders from Salt Lake County with specific addresses and locations of Big Cottonwood Canyon residents. The map is currently being refined to include a Geographic Information Systems (GIS) component and will offer additional emergency response information, such as road conditions, road slopes, turn-around areas, electric shut-off sites and residential contact numbers.

In addition to community fuel reduction projects and the distribution of a newsletter during fire season, the wildfire committee has also been working with the county on planning and zoning issues that affect the canyon. Said Cameron: “For the first time, we feel like we have some input into our own defense.”

Both Johnson and Hammons hope a feeling of empowerment is the greatest legacy of the training. “When people leave the room, I think the first thing they feel is that they can

Big Cottonwood Canyon resident Barbara Cameron

“For the first time, we feel like we have some input into our own defense.”

— Barbara Cameron

do something, rather than that helpless feeling of ‘we don’t even know where to start,’” Johnson said. “Then it snowballs and they want to do more and more as they realize it really is working.”

One of the ways that Hammons and Johnson empower communities is by demonstrating creative approaches to funding wildfire safety initiatives. By focusing on resources rather than money, communities are shown how to supplement direct grant assistance by generating in-kind support like volunteer labor, donated materials and equipment, cash contributions and community partnerships.

In the 10 months after its training, Big Cottonwood Canyon reported more than \$82,000 in in-kind donations, in addition to a \$1,200 grant from the Firewise Communities/USA project for an ArcView software program, which was used to develop the new map. Big Cottonwood Canyon has also applied for a National Fire Plan grant based on its in-kind donations.

Another benefit of the workshops comes from bringing community members together in a forum that promotes communication and support and highlights the power of working as a team. At a training in Brian Head, Utah, in August 2002, residents and agency representatives alike were heartened by the many new faces in the room and hopeful that it signaled an emerging commitment to wildfire mitigation.

“We’ve all been doing what we can for our own properties, but until this meeting we hadn’t come together as a whole to make the community more defensible,” said Peg Simons, a Brian Head homeowner. “I think we will finally be able to take the motivation and put it into motion.”

Brian Head Fire Captain Dave Stolrow was equally optimistic. “I feel like the load is now

being shared and that a lot more is going to be accomplished in a shorter period of time,” he said. “We’re going to have more backing from the community—and if residents develop the plan and are part of it and understand why it’s necessary, it’s going to be one hundred times more effective.”

As they do with all the communities that attend the Community Solutions workshops, Hammons and Johnson will track the program outcomes in Brian Head to measure progress in what promises to be a long journey—and Brian Head has already taken its first step by working to build a fully functional wildfire council.

But the one outcome that is perhaps hardest to measure might be the most important of all. “The primary goal is to change the culture of the communities so they no longer think of this as somebody else’s responsibility,” Hammons said.

To both Hammons and Johnson, that is the ultimate community solution. ■

Six Basic Elements of Fire Planning

- Fuel reduction
- Facilities and equipment
- Education
- Emergency response
- Regulative issues
- Evaluation and maintenance

For more information

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