

Living with Fire

Communities Reduce Risks with Firewise Concepts

ROBIN WYATT-LITTLE GETS EMOTIONAL when she talks about the brave men and women who put themselves in harm's way to protect lives and property from fire.

In June 1999, Wyatt-Little came face-to-face with the Hillside Fire just outside the central California town of Kernville. From a mountain-top, she watched as the out-of-control blaze edged its way up a slope toward her home. Flames on the other side of the road below the home trapped her husband.

"The fire trucks couldn't rescue him," Wyatt-Little, 60, recalled. "At 66 years of age, he ran up our small mountain and escaped the fire to safety."

A few hours later, the fire was contained and Wyatt-Little drove down the mountain expecting to see complete devastation.

"But as I went down the road, here was each home rising out of the ashes, with these little oases of homes still intact. And I was just amazed! It was one wonderful surprise after another," she exclaimed.

Wyatt-Little told her story at a 2003 Firewise Communities Workshop in Bakersfield, California. The fire had come within 20 feet of her property and she had nothing but praise for the firefighters who contained the blaze. Not a single house was lost.

"I still get goose bumps when I talk about it because I describe this as feeling like a child when you see a fire truck coming up the road. It's like your parents are coming to take care of everything," she said.

"A few days later, I was told that maybe that's not the healthiest attitude about firefighters, but it was an honest assessment on my part because I had not experienced this before. I'm from Buffalo, New York. What do I know about wildfire?"

It turns out that Wyatt-Little knew enough to help keep her home and community from burning. The defensible space that she and her homeowners' association had created was the reason for all the "oases" she saw that June day.

In April, only two months before the fire broke out, the Kern Valley Fire Safety Council had given a presentation at one of her homeowners' association meetings.

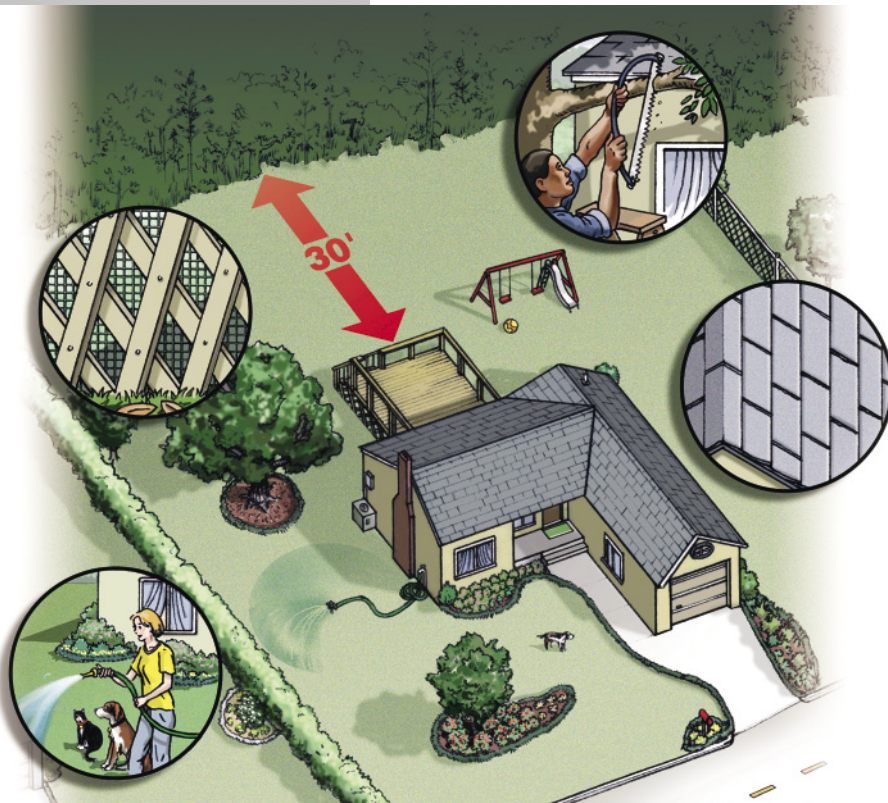
"They scared the daylights out of us with a wonderful video on wildfire," Wyatt-Little recalled. "Within a week, I saw people out there clearing and creating their defensible space. What we were soon to learn and realize was that defensible space works."

It wasn't long after that first wildland fire experience that Dan Anglin, coordinator of the Kern River Valley Fire Safety Council, called to ask if she would join the group.

"So now I'm the first one to get out there and beat the drums for defensible space," she said, adding a final thought before breaking down in front of the 125 Firewise workshop participants. "I get real emotional for all of you who work on our behalf to make us safe."

Perhaps Wyatt-Little didn't realize it at the time, but she had broken the cycle of being a fire victim. She too was now working on behalf of people in making them safer from fire.

A diagram provided by Firewise on their Web site to help home owners construct defensible space



Across the country, attitudes and policies are changing from the traditional view of firefighters as “protectors” and homeowners as “victims” of wildland fire. The paradigm has shifted from “protector-victim” to “partner-partner.”

Wyatt-Little had gone from being a potential victim of wildland fire to an empowered partner and protector of her own community.

What is Firewise?

Firewise is an idea that has been long in coming but is now catching on throughout the country.

It was the devastating wildfires in 1985 that got the attention of fire service professionals, who began to see a growing number of fire losses in wildland/urban interface areas. That year, wildland fires claimed more than 1,400 homes in California and Florida alone.

A year later, the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) held a conference with professionals from many disciplines and agencies to help define the issues associated with living in the wildland/urban interface.

“At first we coordinated and dealt only with the government agencies and fire safety organizations to address this growing problem,” said Dan Bailey, USFS Wildland Urban Interface Program coordinator and NFPA board member.

“But with more and more fires in the early 1990s, our thinking shifted away from government dependence on finding solutions,” Bailey added. “We came to the conclusion that we had to share the problem-solving with the communities at risk, and that’s the concept we’re dealing with now — the community.”

The result is Firewise, initiated in 1999 by the National Wildland/Urban Interface Fire Working Team, a consortium of federal agencies and national associations.

The team’s goal for the program is not only to address current wildland/urban interface issues, but also to shape a future



www.firewise.org

where homes and businesses are built to survive wildland fires without direct help from firefighting resources. If that can be accomplished, officials say, then the limited resources can be focused solely on controlling the wildfire.

By February 2003, more than a dozen communities in Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Idaho, New Mexico, Washington and Utah were participating in the Firewise program, which has earned a National Fire Plan Award for its commitment to training communities to be more resistant to catastrophic wildfires.

About the workshops

One of the most successful elements of the Firewise initiative is the workshop format that is used to get the ball rolling in a community.

The workshops — which bring together homeowners, planners, community leaders, fire service representatives, architects and developers — are designed to show individuals how to perform wildfire risk and hazard severity assessments and how to build partnerships within their own communities.

Beginning in 2000, the workshops utilized an interactive approach that teaches participants to plan and implement basic fire resistant community development practices.

The participants use Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping software to apply real-life lessons in a fictionalized setting.

GIS allows participants to spatially depict land use, subdivision design and fire protection planning issues in a dynamic format. Maps can be produced for presentation or evaluation purposes, and computers enable more extensive assessment analysis and rapid decision-making.

Workshop participants then divide into groups to learn how to conduct wildland fire risk and hazard severity assessments for the fictional communities of Bear Heights and Lake Heights, in the fictional Falls County. Once the groups determine the fire hazard ratings, participants look at ways to reduce those hazards, using a community-based approach.

“What’s great about the Firewise workshops is that they empower all the players,” said workshop participant Jody Lyle, a fire information and education specialist for Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks. “The workshop makes everyone responsible for a safer community.”

As of February 2003, Firewise had conducted 20 workshops throughout the country, reaching more than 2,000 participants from almost 800 communities in 47 states. For more information on workshop dates and locations, visit the Firewise Web site at www.firewise.org/communities.

Follow-up and support

Once participants complete the Firewise Communities Workshop, they have access to a variety of tools and resources that can help them create their own community fire management plan.

To help implement Firewise principles within a community, the program provides additional support features including the Web site, resource materials, follow-up technical assistance, computer software, textbooks and other publications.

“Firewise is more than just our workshops,” Bailey emphasized. “Our organization keeps participants and others informed of Firewise concepts through numerous educational projects.”

The program also encourages outreach by partnering with local businesses.

“We’re working with Home Depot, Lowe’s and Ace Hardware with kiosks that demonstrate the kind of fire hazards facing communities and what kinds of materials individuals should incorporate into their homes in order to protect them from wildfire,” Bailey said.

Breaking the cycle

The success in Kernville, California, is exactly what Bailey hopes Firewise will generate nationwide.

“What we learned about the wildland/urban interface problem is that we really need to keep the focus on the homeowners and the community,” Bailey said. “That’s where the constant changes occur.

“The community is part of the solution. We want to empower each individual in the community so they are no longer caught up in the cycle of the ‘protector-victim,’ where firefighters come out to save every home while trying to battle the fire.

“Our goal is to train communities on how to build fire-resistant homes, have better urban planning and create defensible space so they become their own protectors from wildland fire.”

It is an idea that works. ■

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Community leaders and professionals will be handpicked to become part of a FIREWISE project for the new millennium: the FIREWISE Communities Workshop series.

Visit our web site for workshop locations and dates.

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