

# Community Chips Away at Wildfire Mitigation

*Sundance changes culture along with landscape*

**T**HIS IS A STORY ABOUT A COMMUNITY in the wildland/urban interface that took a long look at its wildfire risk and decided to do something about it. But where such a story usually begins with a wake-up call in the form of a catastrophic fire, in Sundance, Utah, the process began with a simple meeting.

In August 1998, a handful of residents came together with state and local fire managers in a community fire forum. Joining them were fire experts from across the United States, as well as a facilitator to keep the discussions on track.

One of the meeting participants was Jack Cohen, a scientist with the U.S. Forest Service in Missoula, Montana, who has continued to consult with the community. He saw right away that Sundance faced significant challenges.

“I conducted a quick assessment of the community and identified a number of ignition factors needing mitigation,” he said.

The experts walked the attendees through a process designed to establish a long-term fire mitigation plan, and everyone was left with a lengthy list of things to do. The daylong meeting went well, but as one participant later recalled, “That’s always the easy part. Then what do you do?”

In Sundance they kept meeting, once a month, and soon they were joined by representatives from the Utah Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands and other agencies. Eight months later, after sharing a draft with area stakeholders, the group emerged with the North Fork Wildfire Plan, which continues to guide Sundance on its journey toward sustainable, communitywide wildfire mitigation.

## **‘A mixture of old and new’**

Sundance sits in the north fork of Provo Canyon, about 45 miles south of Salt Lake City. Towering above Sundance is 12,000-foot Mount Timpanogos. Surrounding the town are forests where aspen, conifer and oak-

brush vie for supremacy and an occasional meadow opens to a view of the mountains. During the winter, snow covers the area and it becomes a popular ski destination.

Like many resort communities, Sundance has a mix of full- and part-time inhabitants, though the number of residential water hook-ups, 350, is far greater than the number of full-time adult residents, 70. Still, there are 11 different homeowner associations, and Sundance remains unincorporated under the jurisdiction of the North Fork Special Service District.

Alpine Loop Road runs through the heart of Sundance and connects to the side roads that twist high into the canyon where small cottages and multi-million dollar homes sit artfully concealed. Follow Alpine Loop Road to the crestline and Sundance gives way to U.S. Forest Service land.

Actor and director Robert Redford bought much of what today comprises Sundance in 1969 and his Sundance Resort rests at the base of the canyon, welcoming visitors. Across the street is the volunteer fire department that was built on land he donated. Redford has described Sundance as “a mixture of old and new, lush and spare, sophisticated and primitive,” and he continues to make a home there.

An occasional fire down in the valley will send smoke up the canyon toward Sundance, giving residents a scare, but the community itself hasn’t had a major burn in more than a century. While a wildfire didn’t drive people to participate in the August 1998 meeting, other factors did.

## **‘A long, slow process’**

Kathy Hammons attended the meeting and was the first chair of the ad hoc committee that formed in its aftermath. She credited the people who moved to Sundance from other at-risk communities for bringing a new perspective.

“I was raised in California where wildfires are common and a firefighting infrastructure

Sundance resident  
Kathy Hammons



is taken for granted,” Hammons said. “The population in Utah is just starting to sprawl into the more fire-prone areas, and many new people coming in understood that we were in a pretty bad situation.”

At the time of the meeting, residents had also recently been warned by state foresters that Sundance and the other communities along Utah’s Wasatch Front were extremely vulnerable to fire. Against this backdrop, and with the support of Redford and other community leaders, a fire forum was put together.

Over the years Sundance had built one of the best volunteer fire departments in the state while also working to mitigate its fire risks. For example, residents have long performed “bridge watch,” which involves stopping cars on busy holiday weekends to

pass out fire-safety literature. And in the early 1990s, strict ordinances went into effect throughout Utah County, which includes Sundance, calling for wildfire-oriented building and defensible space on any new construction.

But it wasn’t until the fire forum that a coordinated, comprehensive approach to wildfire mitigation began to emerge and some longstanding paradigms began to change.

“It has been a long, slow process,” said Tom Wroe, Utah County fire marshal since 1987 and 34-year veteran of firefighting. “The dynamics of this community are different than in other parts of the country. People buy land here and move here because they want to get away. It’s a place they come to for solitude. It’s a great place to play.



Sundance homes in the interface

“But there is a lot of work that needs to be done when you buy a mountain property.”

Two of the biggest challenges facing the fire forum were finding a way to involve part-time residents in the community effort and overcoming resistance from those opposed to changing the natural look of the area. So as the participants left that first meeting, there was a high degree of motivation, a mountain of work—and a few surprises.

“We started by forming an ad hoc committee, and we thought we would have to put this whole thing together and shop it,” Hammons said. “But it went the other way. The agency representatives wanted to come to the table with us, and that just shocked us. We had no idea that they would want to be part of this.”

Hammons also discovered that the mere act of planning produced results. “What we found through the planning process is that once you sit down and start, you are immediately forming committees that are action-oriented. So even though it might take awhile to finish the plan, the committees will still be moving forward.”

### *‘It started clicking’*

Today the North Fork Fire and Safety Advisory Council is the focal point of the community’s wildfire mitigation efforts, anchored by a wildfire plan that continues to evolve. Stew Olsen, a lifelong resident of Sundance and a member of the family that originally settled the canyon, was chair of the North Fork Special Service District Board for several years and saw the council go through distinct phases.

A major change occurred when the original ad hoc committee became an advisory council under the special service district board. “Even early on it was clear that the district had to be involved on an active level, since it is the only government in Sundance,” Olsen said. “And since the

district is also in charge of the volunteer fire department, it was an opportunity to join the government and community together.”

A second change occurred in 2002. For the first time, the board voted—unanimously—to begin assessing for specific fire mitigation activities, such as removing excess fuels, educating the public and developing evacuation plans. The board even voted to buy a chipper. And Olsen said there was no real opposition. “People don’t like to pay for things, but when they see houses starting to burn...”

The assessments have provided something else, too. There is now paid clerical support for the advisory council and committee members—all volunteers—who do much of the day-to-day work.

From the beginning, the ad hoc committee proved adept at generating outside financial support for its activities.

“We brought in a \$28,000 grant the first year and put it into a demonstration project that showed a lot of people what we could do,” Hammons said. “The next year we received \$190,000 under the National Fire Plan to continue our work.” The required 50-50 match for the grants was paid through sweat-equity.

As of February 2002, in-kind donations of labor, services, supplies and equipment amounted to more than \$250,000. For example, in 2000, 2001 and 2002, Brigham Young University—which operates the Aspen Grove Family Camp in the canyon—brought in hundreds of volunteers to spend half a day clearing out dangerous fire fuels. Each visit netted the community some \$35,000 as an in-kind donation.

“When I first started it was always, ‘But we don’t have any money...’” Hammons said. “Now people are seeing that they can bring in money just by cleaning out their property or changing their roof—by doing what will make them safer anyway. All of a sudden, it started clicking that we could do this.”

To Wroe, it is important for communities to realize what can be accomplished without regard to financial circumstances.

“There has never been the emphasis that you must have a big wallet,” said the county fire marshal. “Any community can pull its people together, organize and come up with a plan.”

Jim Shell works for the U.S. Forest Service and recently took over managing the programs that deliver National Fire Plan dollars to states. Prior to relocating to Washington, D.C., Shell spent 12 years with the forest service in Ogden, Utah. From there, he watched and encouraged Sundance as it worked to address the hazards facing the community.

“Sundance has had strong leadership,” he said. “I know they benefited from the support of the National Fire Plan, but they were already on a good course of action. Sundance has been working at this for quite awhile, and it was one of the first communities in Utah to see the need.

“Support from the National Fire Plan may not always be there. Our hope is that a couple years of funding can help people figure out how to work together—that would be the big gain of this effort. Success comes from people who realize they have a need or a problem and then carry the ball.”

### ‘One bite at a time’

A look at the wildfire projects undertaken in Sundance since 1998 reflects the depth and breadth of the commitment. Some of the projects include: annual evacuation meetings with emergency responders; collaborative re-roofing projects; free mobile chipping; annual clean-up days; fuel reductions along major ingress/egress routes; individual property assessments by wildfire experts; installation of non-flammable street signs; purchase of emergency sirens; and publication of a monthly newsletter, called *Fireline*.

Equally impressive is the number of people who have pitched in to make a difference. More than 100 individuals have been

Sundance Safety  
Officer Kenny Johnson





Utah County Fire  
Marshall Tom Wroe

recognized by the advisory council for their contributions — ranging from monetary donations and volunteer committee assignments to property cleanup and community-wide assistance.

To firefighting professionals like Kenny Johnson, who is the safety officer for the Sundance Resort and assistant fire chief of the volunteer fire department, one of the most important elements of the effort is that it has been initiated and led by the community itself.

“We are there as a professional resource, to provide information regarding fire suppression and what needs to be done as far as fuel reduction and awareness,” he said. “But we try not to say, ‘You have to do this.’ If it comes to people from their neighbors or their community, I think it is more effective. The paid professionals can speak all they want, but if the community is not involved it won’t matter.”

Both Johnson and Wroe regularly attend meetings of the fire advisory council to offer input and support.

It can also be beneficial to focus on the small steps that add up to meaningful change. “In the beginning, start small,” Johnson said. “Send out a newsletter and raise the level of

awareness. Then take on larger projects and issues. It will snowball from there.” Wroe said he thinks of it as an “elephant dinner—just take one bite at a time.”

Hammons said it is just as important to be patient. “What we have learned is that people do a little bit every year,” she said. “Giving them stages has worked very well here. The key is getting everyone to participate to the level they can at that particular time. And then letting it take as much time as it needs to take, but to keep it moving.” For example, it took Sundance three years to agree on a plan for installing street signs.

While connecting part-time residents to the community continues to be a challenge, there are signs of progress—such as the lack of opposition to the assessments, which could be an indication that residents have come to rely on the services provided by the district board and advisory council.

“This is the first thing in Sundance that has been able to bring the different groups together,” Hammons said. “Wildfire crosses all denominators.”

Hammons has seen the culture change in other ways, too. “About 10 years ago, a homeowner installed a metal roof and the roof was above the tree line, so everyone could see it,” she said. “The community was absolutely appalled. Now it is a great example of visionary thinking. We’ve shown that it is possible to have very different roofing and landscaping looks and still meet safety standards.”

When Sundance homeowner David Heaps re-landscaped he had two goals—lessen fire danger by clearing dangerous foliage away from the house while maintaining core aesthetic qualities.

“We wanted to push the natural stuff back a little but we didn’t want to encroach on it too much, because the natural habitat is why we’re here,” he said. “I think it’s obvious that if everybody does their part, the whole becomes stronger.” He also installed rock barriers, put in fire retardant vegetation and added a sprinkler system.

*“By developing the plan in true collaboration with the community and agency partners, you’ve always got people who want to maintain it.”*

— Kathy Hammons

Julie Mack, who heads the North Fork Preservation Association, said that wildfire mitigation and environmentalism should not be seen as mutually exclusive. “We are practicing forestry ecology,” she said. “Since we are at such high risk for fire, thinning the forest and improving the health of the ecosystem makes it safer for homeowners and makes it better for the environment.”

### *‘Standing in Mother Nature’s shoes’*

In many ways, the work in Sundance is a never-ending job that is only just beginning. Maintaining what has already been done is a huge project in itself, as is the ongoing effort to reach homeowners who have yet to embrace mitigation. And there are remaining concerns—such as planning for a large-scale evacuation. On a summer day, more than 7,000 people could be in the canyon, with limited egress.

Sundance could also be tested as early organizers and supporters give way to other volunteers. Hammons now spends much of her time helping other communities in Utah

prepare for wildfire, and Olsen stepped down as chair of the special service district board at the end of 2002, though he remains on the board. But Hammons is confident that the wildfire plan adopted after the August 1998 meeting will ensure longevity and sustainability and that the torch will continue to be passed.

“That’s why you anchor to planning — whoever comes and goes, the plan is still there,” she said. “By developing the plan in true collaboration with the community and agency partners, you’ve always got people who want to maintain it.”

From Wroe’s perspective, that is an obligation all residents assume when they choose to live in the wildland/urban interface.

“Fire is a natural phenomenon that cleans out the area, allowing the life cycle to start again,” he said. “We don’t need fire if folks are willing to look at the responsibilities they have. They are standing in Mother Nature’s shoes now, and they need to assume that awesome responsibility.” ■

Kenny Johnson  
at Sundance Resort

