

Introduction

A SIMPLE WOOD-FRAMED HOME sits tucked within a rich green forest. Perched on a hillside, its deck affords a spectacular view of the valley below, as do the large picture windows and glass doors. The shake shingle roof gives the home an old-style authenticity perfect for the rustic landscape. A stack of firewood has been readied for the first chill, and neighbors' houses are just visible through the tree-tops.

It is a powerful image that continues to draw more and more people into previously unpopulated areas of the country. But while the appeal of living close to nature is obvious, the risks of doing so are less clear.

In recent years, images of raging wildfires have been impossible to ignore: panicked residents fleeing their homes with only moments to spare, communities shrouded in smoke and ash for days on end, exhausted firefighters putting themselves in harm's way to protect lives and property.

Yet in the last decade there have not been more fires started or acres burned than usual. Fires have always burned in the wilderness and always will. What has changed is the degree to which people are affected by them. And as populations continue to shift from urban to rural lands, wildfires will likely pose even greater risks in the future.

FEMA developed this initiative as a way to document some of the best, most innovative fire mitigation practices currently underway in the wildland/urban interface. We visited several states in the interior West and talked to people from all walks of life. What follows are their stories, with a focus

on challenges faced, obstacles overcome and lessons learned.

By showing specific instances where people are working together to pursue meaningful change, our goal is to inspire others to do the same. The individuals featured in these stories share a desire to lessen wildfire threats in their communities, but they also share the knowledge that progress often comes slowly. For every success there is a setback, and for every satisfying end there is a humble beginning.

Still, in countless places and in countless ways, they are making a difference.

We have not sought to take sides on the more contentious debates or to promote certain practices over others. In telling these stories, we simply hope to provide a starting point for others who might one day take a similar journey.

While there are no one-size-fits-all prescriptions for wildfire safety, successful mitigation efforts share common elements: reaching across jurisdictional lines, building community support, accepting personal responsibility, and maintaining sufficient reserves of flexibility, creativity and patience.

There can be little doubt that people will continue to seek out the beauty and tranquility of natural settings in which to live. There can be equally little doubt that fire will one day intrude. It is not a question of if, but when and where.

The good news is that mitigation offers a way for communities to more peacefully co-exist with fire—and for residents to be truly at home in the woods.

— Michael D. Brown



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