

Minnesota Hazard Mitigation Project

Chipper Days Turn Vegetative Fuels Into Energy

The Challenge

Expanding development and recreational use in natural areas in Itasca County, MN, are creating an increasingly complex landscape. Trees, brush, and other flammable vegetation grow in close proximity to combustible homes and structures. Under the 2003 Healthy Forest Restoration Act, the Itasca County Board of Commissioners and local, State, and Federal agencies began to assess wildfire risks. This team developed the Itasca County Wildfire Protection Plan, which identified education and mitigation activities that would reduce the wildfire hazards. A team that represented Itasca County, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, University of Minnesota Extension, the Chippewa National Forest, and 20 local fire departments were responsible for implementing the plan.

The Solution

With National Fire Plan funding provided by the Northeastern Area State and Private Forestry through the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, in 2007 a grant provided training for local rural fire departments in Firewise principles and conducting home assessments. Volunteer fire departments conducted over 5,400 assessments throughout Itasca County and identified specific homeowner mitigation needs.

In 2008, the implementation team was awarded a second grant for mitigation through education, vendor training, and on-the-ground activities by means of the Chipper Days Program. Activities began in February 2008 and were completed by December 2009.

Resulting Benefits

During winter 2008 the University of Minnesota Extension and the Itasca County Firewise coordinator provided an educational program to communities throughout the county. Residents, civic groups, lake associations, and local decision makers were educated in Firewise principles and encouraged to participate in the vendor training and Chipper Days Program. Outreach efforts used a variety of media including local newspapers, radio, newsletters, and Web sites.

Four vendor training workshops resulted in identification and publication of a list of service providers or contractors



After seeing the presentation, homeowners realized they needed to make their homes safe from wildfire. Photo by Bill Brink, Itasca County Firewise Coordinator

(such as loggers, tree care providers, excavators, and landscapers) who could assist homeowners with mitigation activities.

The first Chipper Day was held in May 2009 in the Suomi area of the county. From all of the properties, the vegetation was hauled to a horizontal tub grinder and turned into chips for use by the Minnesota Power Rapids Energy Center in Grand Rapids, MN. Under the 2008 Firewise grant, 60 property owners participated in 11 areas. The Chipper Days Program collected 275 tons of woody biomass. Each project area had a neighborhood liaison who worked with individual homeowners and coordinated with the county Firewise coordinator.

Sharing Success

- Support from the Itasca County Board of Commissioners and fire protection plan implementation team was key to the success of the Chipper Days Program.
- Neighborhood liaisons were important in helping with mitigation activities, such as setting a time table and making sure projects were implemented in a timely fashion.
- Families were willing to participate to help keep their homes safe and contribute to renewable energy.
- Future efforts will produce chips on site and transport them to designated facilities, as hauling the woody material was costly.



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