

Amidst a Wildfire Catastrophe

Education and Preparedness Efforts Produce Results

The Challenge

Adams County is a fire-prone rural county in central Wisconsin dominated by red pine and jack pine forests. The wildland-urban interface in Adams County is expanding in part because of the subdivision and sale of small tracts of land by an industrial forest land company. Landownership in the county is a mixture of primary and vacation homes in areas with hazardous fuels conditions.

The Solution

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has utilized National Fire Plan funding provided by the USDA Forest Service Fire and Aviation Management program to reduce fuels, better prepare for wildfires, and educate the public. The Wisconsin DNR conducted mock fire exercises with local wildland and structural firefighters in the Adams County area to improve their preparedness. Incident Management Teams were established to train and prepare for large fires throughout the year, and Fire Action Plans are now developed for each of nine fire areas of the State every year prior to fire season.

Resulting Benefits

- Printed and distributed Structure Zone Map books for use by emergency services personnel in Adams County. These maps document both structural and wildland resources to help protect life, property, and natural resources during emergencies.
- Developed educational projects including, local newspaper advertisements, a fire prevention billboard, statewide radio announcements, a wildland-urban interface calendar, a Firewise workshop, the "Point of Origin" newsletter, a "Living with Fire" newspaper insert, and a homeowner wildfire protection flyer mailed with every property tax bill.
- Trained two hand crews in prescribed burning and wildfire suppression techniques.

Firewise preparedness and education programs in fire-prone areas of the State paid off when 300 homes were saved in a catastrophic fire.



The fire burned around this home and outbuildings in Adams County, Wisconsin because the homeowners created and maintained a defensible space.

Photo credit: Wisconsin DNR

Sharing Success

On May 5, 2005, Wisconsin DNR firefighters responded to human-caused fire that had escaped and became one of the most devastating wildfires in nearly 25 years. There were significant structural and natural resource losses in the community, but no fatalities or serious injuries. Within 11 hours, the "Cottonville Fire" burned 3,410 acres. The wildfire damaged 15 homes and destroyed 30 homes and 60 structures valued at approximately \$1 million. It also destroyed timber valued at nearly \$4 million.

Despite the devastation nearly 300 homes were saved and over 125 people were evacuated safely as a result of thorough preparedness and education efforts. A post fire assessment concluded that losses would have been greater without the preventive measures undertaken by the Wisconsin DNR and local firefighters. Three homes were saved because of specific Firewise actions taken by homeowners after they received information from the Wisconsin DNR about living in fire prone ecosystems.



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