



Firewise USA – The role of community activation in wildfire preparedness and response

10/15/2026 | Megan Fitzgerald-McGowan

Agenda

- Introductions
- Why are we here?
- Overview of Firewise USA
- How community activation can help response and wildfire outcomes
- Discussion



Who am I?

- Wildland firefighter
- Dispatcher
- Firewise USA State Liaison
- Firewise USA community member
- Frustrated practitioner



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Who's the in the room?

- Where are you from?
- What do you do?
- What are your burning questions?



Who is involved in Community Wildfire Adaptation?



About the National Fire Protection Association

Global, self-funded non-profit devoted to eliminating death, injury, property and economic loss due to fire, electrical and related hazards.

- Support for development, adoption, and enforcement of codes and standards
- Research and data analysis
- Technical training and certification
- Public education
- Outreach and advocacy

FAST FACTS

- Founded in 1896
- More than 40,000 members
- 6,000 volunteers
- 275+ technical code development committees
- 300 codes and standards
- 300 employees

Why are we here?

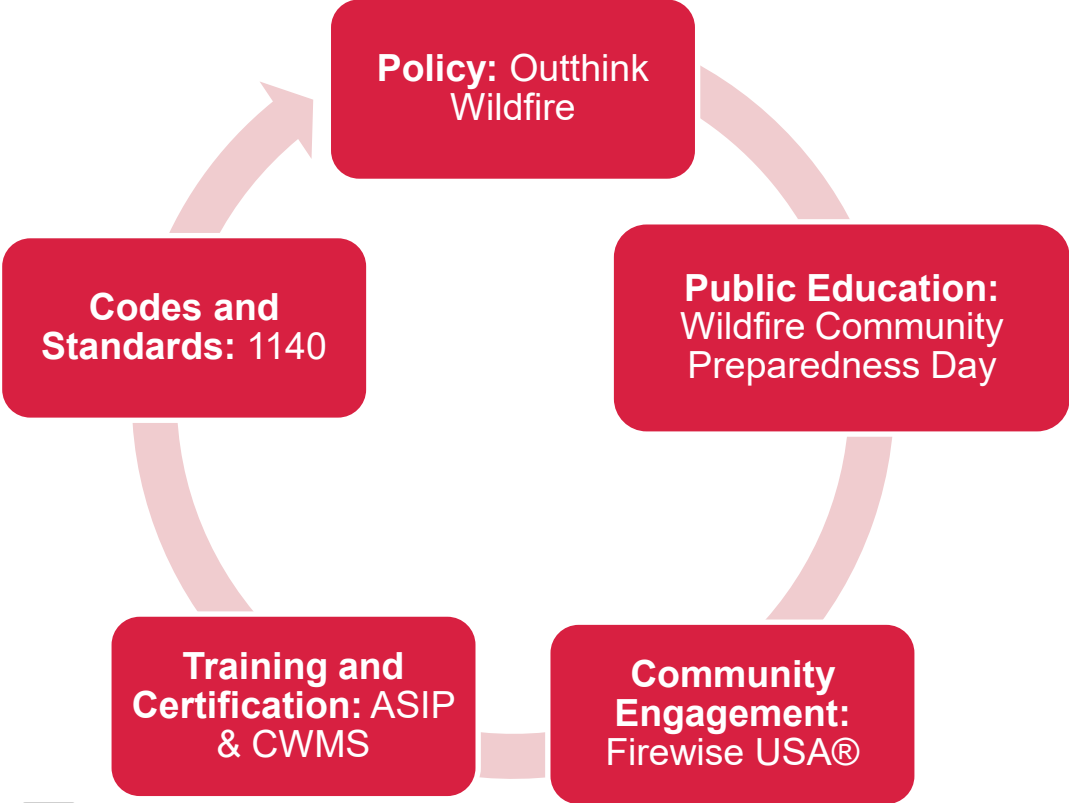
Firefighting Strategies for the Wildland/Urban Interface

Mar 18, 2011

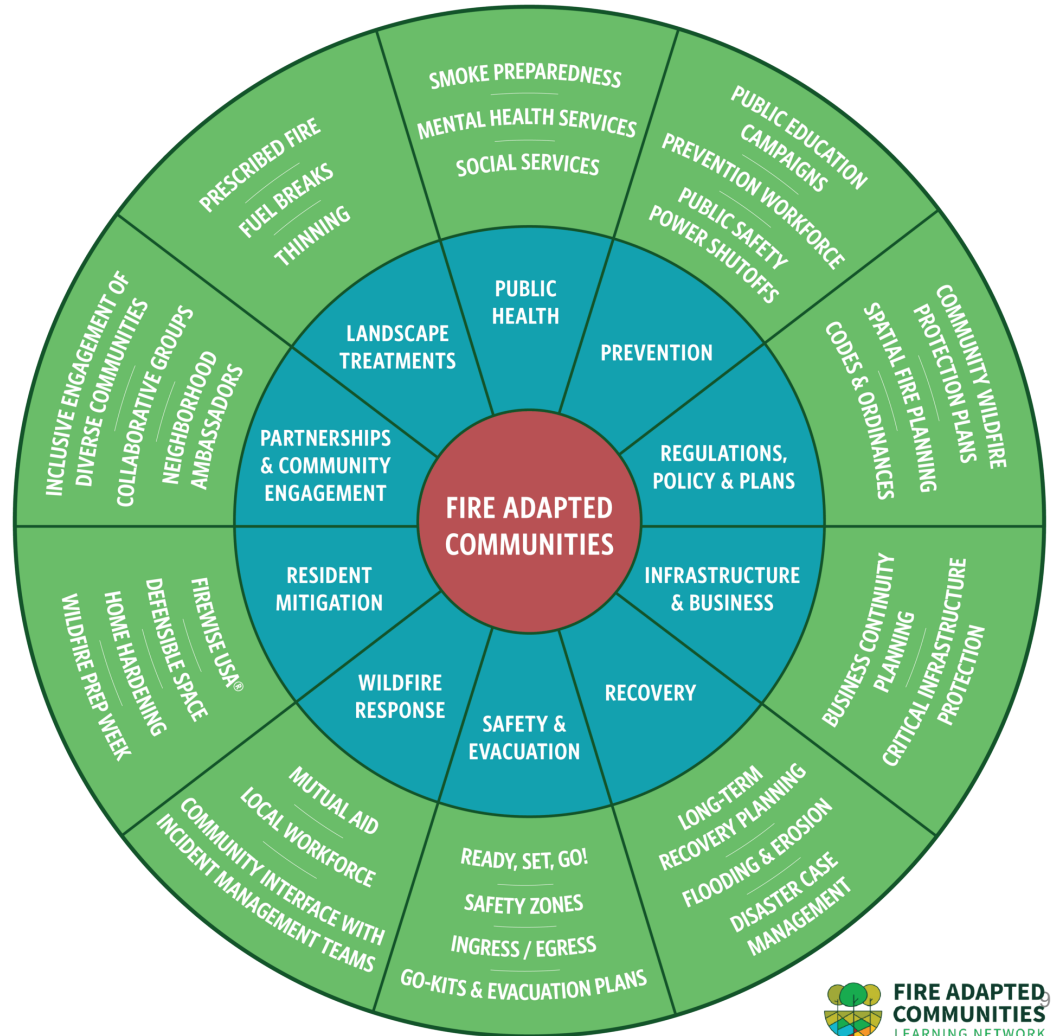
Go to video



NFPA Wildfire Safety Work



Where do we fit in the Cohesive Strategy for Wildland Fire Management?



NFPA and Wildfire

- Structures and residents are at risk to fire anywhere.
- NFPA's vision focuses on life safety and property-loss elimination.
- Engaged in WUI risk reduction since U.S. wildfire season of 1985.

Fire Protection and Prevention for Summer Homes in Forested Areas

Prepared by the Forest Committee
of the National Fire Protection Association
Adopted 1935

Price: Ten Cents

National Fire Protection Association
International
60 Batterymarch Street
Boston, Mass., U.S.A.



FOUNDATION FOR ACTION



Village of Ruidoso, NM – Kokopelli
Fire, 2002

Our vision – risk
reduction action can
save homes

Wildfires can occur in
areas of residential
development **without**
the occurrence of
disastrous loss

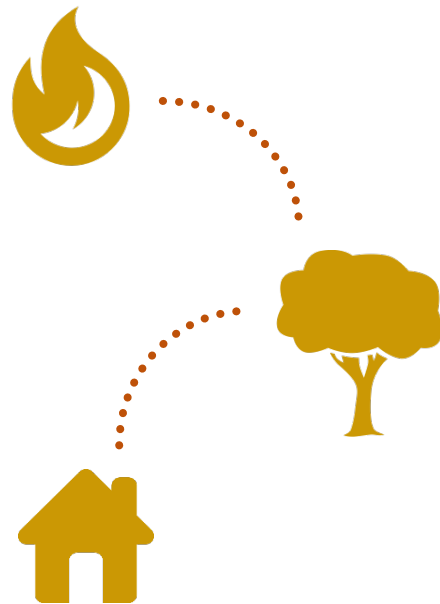


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What does the science say?

- Research by Dr. Jack Cohen (USFS, retired)
 - Fire does not engulf everything in its path
 - Fire only advances to locations that meet requirements of combustion
 - Altering the type, size, quantity, and spacing of vegetation and other fuels will reduce likelihood of combustion
- Research by the Insurance Institute for Business and Home Safety (embers)
 - <https://ibhs.org/risk-research/wildfire/>





Firewise History

Started in 2002

- 12 original pilot sites, 9 are still active
- Partnership between NFPA, USFS, DOI, and NASF

Goal:

- Preventing the destruction of homes during a wildfire event



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FIREWISE USA®
RESIDENTS REDUCING WILDFIRE RISKS

A recognition program that provides a framework to help residents get organized, find direction, and take action to increase the ignition resistance of their homes and community.

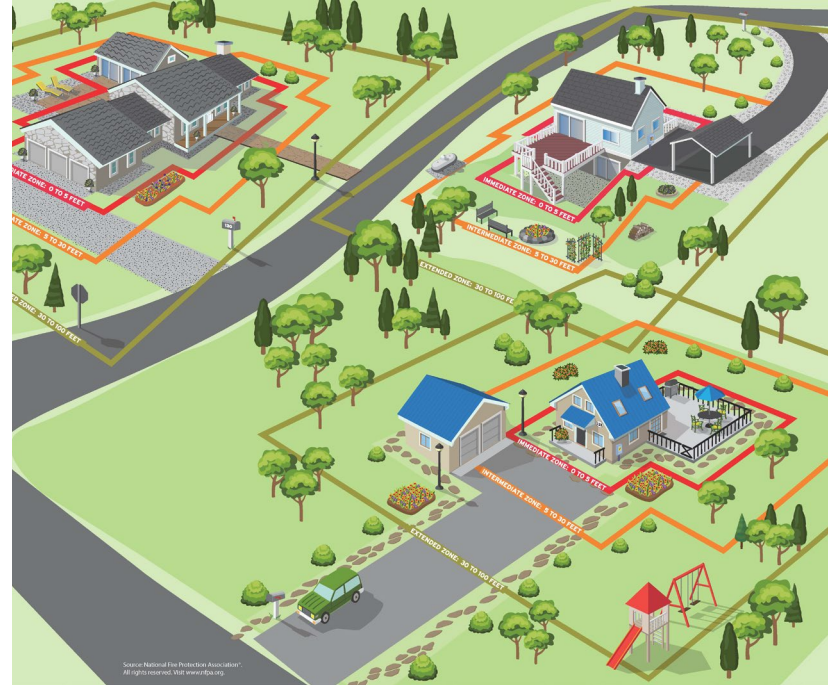


- Individual responsibility
- Encourages neighbors to work together
- Voluntary participation
- A means to decrease risk for residents and first responders



Creating an ignition-resistant community

- Fire science informs social science
- Neighbors must work together to prevent conflagration (structure-to-structure ignitions)



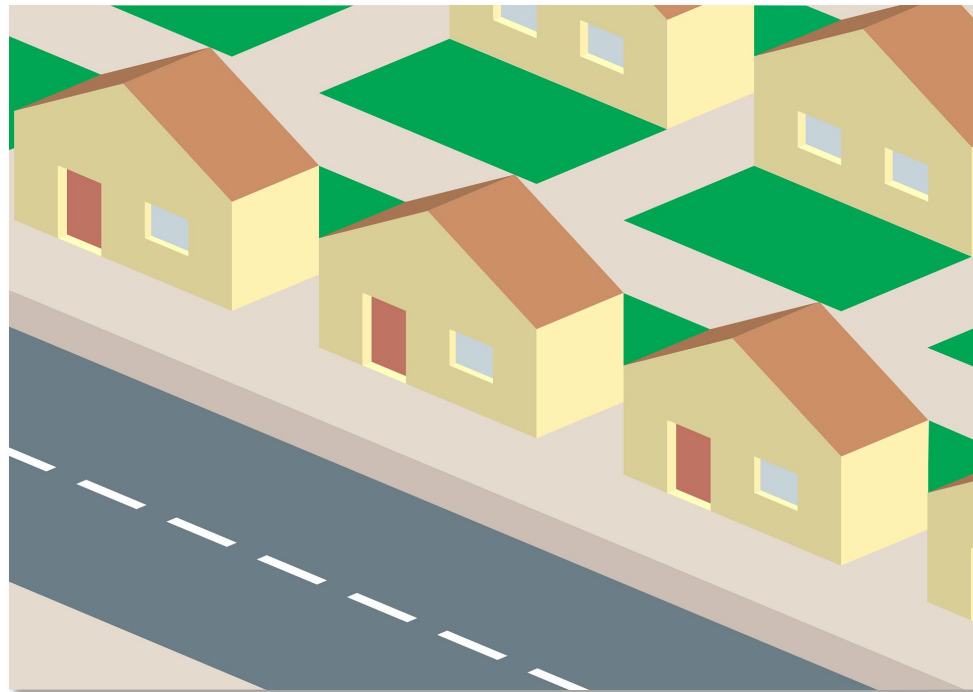
Building Inclusive Communities

Firewise USA is a program built on inclusivity and the understanding that wildfire risk is collective

Each house *and* the whole community are more resilient when everyone does the work

“If you build it...they will come”

- Think about and design your community for the long-term
- Include neighbors even if they aren't doing the work yet



Community/Grass
Roots

Individuals/communities

Local practitioners

Local state
or federal
office

Fire
Department

Fire Safe
Councils

Other SMEs

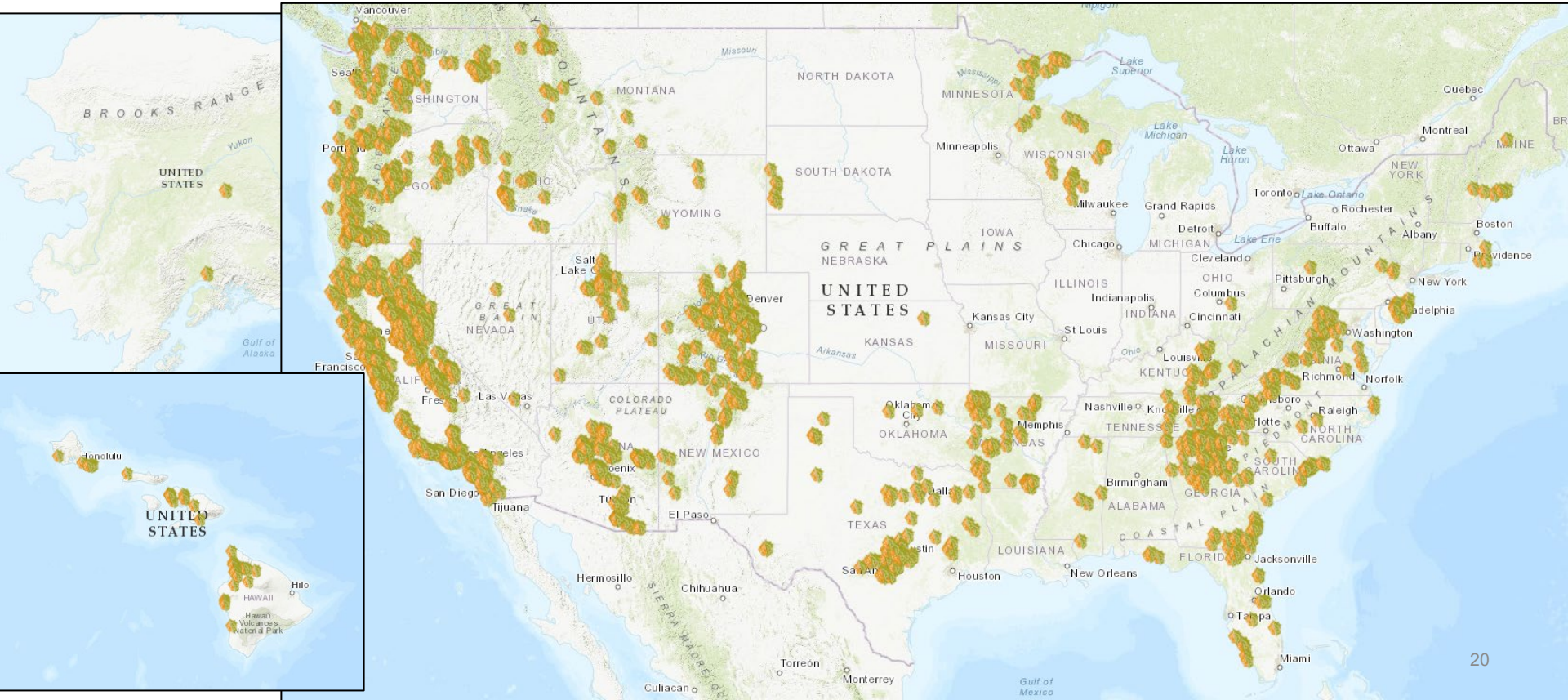
State Liaison

State Forestry or Natural
Resources Department

National program

NFPA

3,600+ Sites in 36 States



Steps to Achieving National Recognition

Visit www.firewise.org and click on **Get Started**

GET ORGANIZED

Form a board/committee comprised of residents and other wildfire stakeholders.

Obtain a wildfire risk assessment.

Determine the size and boundary: minimum 8 and maximum 2,500 dwelling units.

MAKE A PLAN

Create a 3-year action plan that identifies community education and risk reduction actions.

DO THE WORK

Host a minimum of one wildfire risk reduction educational outreach event.

Meet the minimum wildfire risk reduction investment.

TELL US ABOUT IT

Create a Firewise USA® Portal account and submit an application to your state Firewise USA liaison.

To remain “In Good Standing,” Firewise sites must submit an annual renewal application due mid-November.

**Do Firewise USA and other mitigation efforts
make a difference?**

The Trails Fire – Texas 2020

Afternoon of August 13, 2020, a wildfire broke out near Horseshoe Bay, prompting the voluntary evacuation of The Trails of Horseshoe Bay and Blue Lake subdivisions numerous homes.

- 40 homes threatened
- 2 destroyed – Blue Lake Subdivision
- The Trails of Horseshoe Bay – second oldest Firewise site in Texas
- 17 years of investments – hours worked and money spent to address defensible space and shaded fuel
- breaks

By being a Firewise USA® community and taking action to mitigate wildfire damages, The Trails of Horseshoe Bay protected an estimated \$40 million in assessed property value from the Trails Fire.



A Community Prepared

For 17 years, Texas A&M Forest Service (TFS) Wildland-Urban Interface Specialists have worked with The Trails of Horseshoe Bay community to identify high risk areas and guide wildfire mitigation efforts.

Homeowners created defensible spaces around their homes, which allows for a safer workspace for firefighters when battling a blaze, and implemented other Firewise USA® recommendations. The community also maintained shaded fuel breaks along a network of hiking trails to improve the trails' dual purpose of serving as fire breaks and improving general ecosystem health.

As a community, the residents invested time and money towards wildfire risk reduction for a lifetime total of \$131,217.85. That investment paid off.



Sandy Fire – California 2026

- Simi Valley – The Woodlands, 300 homes
- Home retrofits and maintenance, defensible space
- Firefighter intervention



Where else?

Audience share experiences of successes or saves?



Other impacts of mitigation on response

- Life safety: public and first responders
- Better chance for evacuation
- If confident in work homes and neighborhoods have done can:
 - Assign resources to neighborhood protection
 - Allocate more resources to engaging the fire
 - Avoid hazards – lithium-ion batteries, other toxins
- No “fireproof” community, but confidence that work has been done to help create the best possible outcomes

Activation to advocacy

- Firewise USA engagement creates fire department champions
 - Help carry forward other fire safety programs
 - Support local initiatives
 - Support codes and standards implementation and enforcement

Opportunity to address health outcomes?

- Exposure to home fuels vs vegetation
- <https://www.calchiefs.org/news/732470/Wildland-Fires-WUI-Incidents-and-Urban-Conflagrations-a-steep-change-in-firefighter-cancer-risk.htm>

QUESTIONS and COMMENTS?



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THANK YOU!

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www.firewise.org

