Preparing for wildfire: keys to success in 15 communities in the U.S.

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Abstract: In 15 communities across the U.S., the authors found seven keys to community wildland fire preparedness: (1) know your place, (2) draw on local knowledge and skills, (3) build on and build social capital, (4) develop agency and community partnerships, (5) communicate effectively, (6) use legal authorities, and (7) start small, build, and celebrate success.

Keywords: wildland-urban interface, social capital, partnerships, communication
Over the past decade there has been a major shift in philosophy regarding wildland fire—from a philosophy bent on suppression to one that seeks prevention (USDA Forest Service 2000; Western Governors’ Association 2001, USDA Forest Service 2004). While federal, state, and county managers will lead the wildland fire prevention effort on public land, communities will provide the lead at the local level (USDA Forest Service 2004; Society of American Foresters 2004).

Why are communities an appropriate scale for wildland fire preparedness activities?

Communities are more than places where people live, work, and raise their children. They are the relationships, partnerships, attitudes and values that bind people, businesses, organizations and agencies together and motivate them to achieve common goals. (Firewise Communities 2001, 4)

In addition, certain wildland fire preparedness actions—such as insuring adequate water systems, sufficiently wide streets, clear and consistent street signage, and maintenance of perimeter green belts, can only be done at the community level (David 1990).

Our team received National Fire Plan funding to study communities who were taking steps to increases their preparedness for wildland fire. We were interested in (1) what steps have been taken to increase preparedness, and (2) what was the social foundation necessary to support these steps (Jakes et al. 2003, Kruger et al. 2003). We conducted case studies in 15 communities across the U.S. (fig. 1). To date, one of the more significant products to come out of this study has been a series of case study summaries developed for each community that (1) describes the

![Figure 1. Location of 15 case study communities for community wildland fire preparedness research.](image)
community, (2) identifies keys to wildfire preparedness in that community, (3) looks at what is next for the community in terms of wildland fire preparedness, (4) draws lessons learned from the community, and (5) identifies sources of additional information about the community. In this paper we will focus on keys to wildland fire preparedness for the 15 case study communities.

The first key for wildland fire preparedness is to know your place. This refers not only to the landscape, but also to the people in the landscape. Our communities were very knowledgeable about their landscape and their fire history. In addition, they knew their neighbors—their strengths and talents, and their weaknesses or concerns.

This knowledge about the skills and talents of people living in the community relates to the second key for wildland fire preparedness—to build on local knowledge and skills. You often hear the term “human capital” used to refer to the knowledge and skills that a community’s population has gained through formal education and training. Application of human capital to wildland fire preparedness allowed communities to make progress with minimal investment, and empowered residents to take responsibility for preparedness in their neighborhoods and around their homes.

Social capital was the third key for wildland fire preparedness. Social capital, as defined by Pretty (2000, p78), is the “cohesiveness of people in their societies,” and the various networks and relations that build trust and make cooperation possible. Social capital is simply the means to do what needs to be done. It is the relationships that are forged within the community, the leadership that develops among citizens, activities and celebrations that build community cohesion, and the conversations that take place within a community that bring people together to support civic action. The interesting thing about wildland fire preparedness is that there needs to be a minimal level of social capital in order to build preparedness, but activities to build preparedness can also build social capital.

In many communities we heard that partnerships are the key to wildland fire preparedness. Land management agencies alone could not achieve preparedness, and communities acting independent from the agencies that manage the landscape in which they are embedded cannot achieve preparedness. It is through partnerships and collaboration that action was possible.

Communication was the fifth key to wildland fire preparedness. There are seven rules of effective communication (Jakes and Barro 2004). First be clear. Complicated phenomena such as wildland fire and fuels treatment must be clearly explained in non-technical terms. Wildland fire and fuels experts generally cannot accomplish this, so hire people who have communication skills to work with experts to craft words that will be clear to the public. It is important to use simple language and great graphics. Next, use varied sources including technical experts, scientists, and people known to the population. Be consistent and repeat your message often. If your message changes, be sure to explain the change. Use a stream of communication outlets, from TV and radio to direct mail documents. The sixth rule is to tell people what to do. Don’t assume people know what to do. Finally, support people in their search for more information. People often search out information on their own to validate and confirm what they have heard. Place additional, accurate information in readily accessible locations through out the community.

The enactment of legal authorities such as codes, standards, and zoning that restrict development or mandate fuels reductions can be important to achieving community wildland preparedness (Bailey 1991). In a report for the Council of Western State Foresters, it was observed that codes, regulations, and building standards that would increase community wildland fire preparedness exist, but that few states or communities have the public or political will to implement them (Teie and Weatherford 2000). There are, however, communities who have
stepped forward. In Palm Coast, Florida, the city notifies a property owner when they need to reduce fuels (Monroe et al. 2003). Upon notification the owner has two options: they can remove the vegetation themselves or have the city perform the service and cover the costs. If the owner does neither, the city will clear the underbrush and charge the owner the cost plus a fine. If no payment is made, the city will place a lien on the property that must be paid before the lot can be sold or developed. Finally, wildland fire preparedness is most successful if communities start small, build on early successes, and celebrate.

We identified seven keys to wildland fire preparedness in the 15 case study communities. Of the seven, partnerships and communication were often found to be the foundation that forms the basis for building preparedness. As observed by Teie and Weatherford (2000, p.29):

Only when the public truly understands the nature of the wildland/urban interface fire problem will the community-based coalitions needed to effectively mitigate the problem be successful.

**Literature Cited**


