

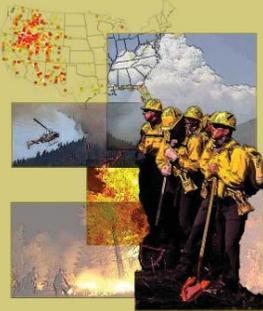
# Bastrop, Texas

## Steps to Improve Community Preparedness for Wildfire

### Community Preparedness Case Study Series

### Case Study #12

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Bastrop, known as the “Home of the Lost Pines,” is a town of about 5,500 in Bastrop County, Texas. The “Lost Pines” is an isolated region of loblolly pine and hardwoods separated by more than 100 miles from the main pinewoods of east Texas. Established in 1832 on the banks of the Colorado River, Bastrop has a picturesque downtown and many historic homes. The region is an attractive place to live for many who work in the capital city of Austin, only 30 miles to the west. In 2002, Bastrop was the sixth fastest growing county in Texas.



Bastrop County’s native ecosystem is a fire-dependent overstory of pine and cedar. Years of fire exclusion have resulted in the buildup of substantial fuel. Large areas of open forest, including Bastrop State Park and Buescher State Park, exist near residences. This, coupled with Bastrop County’s exponential growth, presents a classic wildland-urban interface (WUI) problem.

### The Tahitian Village Experience

Tahitian Village, a 6,000-acre subdivision of Bastrop established in the 1960s, faces a particularly challenging WUI problem. Many lots cannot be developed because of septic system constraints and terrain. These vacant lots contain highly flammable shrub fuels like youpon, Ashe juniper, grasses, and loblolly pine. Narrow roads, steep hills with dangerous intersections, and confusing street names make access difficult for fire-fighting equipment and increase risk from wildland fire. In 1984, a fire in the eastern side of Tahitian Village burned 900 acres. Because not much of the area was developed, few structures were lost. Since then, however, this subdivision has grown to approximately 900 homes.

In 1998, a drought and Florida’s fire experience put Texas on high alert for fires. In Bastrop, Tahitian Village’s recognized susceptibility to wildfire created concern. Public meetings and educational videos were used to heighten awareness of wildfire and mitigation strategies. The Texas Forest Service (TFS), along with volunteer fire departments, the Civic Association in Tahitian Village, and the Tahitian Village Property Owners Association (TVPOA), met with homeowners to introduce them to wildfire mitigation concepts. As a result of the meeting, five homeowners volunteered their homes as sites for defensible space demonstration areas. Federal fire crews were stationed in Bastrop as the fire danger grew. When they weren’t fighting a fire, these crews assessed wildfire hazard in Tahitian Village and rated 91 percent of the subdivision at a moderate or high risk. This heightened awareness of wildfire danger in Tahitian Village led to a variety of educational programs and mitigation activities throughout Bastrop County.



*Bastrop was established on the banks of the Colorado River.*



*Many historical homes line the streets of Bastrop.*

## Elements of Wildfire Preparedness in Bastrop, Texas

### 1. Tahitian Village Wildfire Mitigation Program

This program was begun in 1999 to disseminate the hazard assessment results to homeowners. After several meetings with minimal participation, TVPOA tried something new: the association asked homeowners to complete their own assessments. This reduced the meetings' emphasis on the assessments and focused more attention on preparedness activities, such as fuel mitigation.

### 2. Lost Pines Wildfire Mitigation Program

The goal of this TFS initiative is to empower citizens and local volunteer fire departments through education rather than fear of fire. The TFS has designed two educational courses. The citizens' course educates citizens about fire ecology, teaches them how to conduct neighborhood meetings about wildfire risk, and motivates them to prepare for wildfires. The firefighters' course teaches ways to bring together the volunteer fire departments and community, such as assisting homeowners in their preparedness efforts.

### 3. Mulchfest

The first Mulchfest in Tahitian Village was organized in fall 1999 to help landowners dispose of slash and trimmings from their yards. The program was widely accepted by homeowners, but was eventually discontinued because of the unavailability of a permanent mulch site and a shortage of mulching equipment.

### 4. Lost Pines Project

Bastrop County received a Federal grant for the Texas Wildfire Protection Plan: Lost Pines Project. This grant provides funding for projects that encompass education, land stewardship, fuel reduction, residential planning, and multi-agency partnerships within the Lost Pines. State and local agencies have agreed to contribute additional funding to match the Federal funds.



*Houses surrounded by heavy vegetation are at high wildfire risk.*

## Keys to Wildfire Preparedness in Bastrop

### 1. Strong Community Networks

Bastrop enjoys strong networks among the various organizations and agencies that serve the area. For example, the strong ties between TFS and local volunteer fire departments help in the successful implementation of a WUI program. Many officials in Bastrop hold a position in more than one committee or organization. For example, the person who heads the Water and Wastewater Department for the City of Bastrop is also a member of the Rural Fire Advisory Council of the TFS and former chief of the Bastrop volunteer fire department. The movers and shakers in the community are a core group who know each other, resulting in a high interconnectedness among people and organizations.

### 2. Communication

During a fire, it is important that emergency responders use the same radio frequency. Texas has an improved communication network among the city, county, and state, including a county fire net channel for emergency operations and statewide mutual aid channels. These help make communication among emergency responders quick and efficient.

### 3. Volunteer Fire Departments

Bastrop County has 13 volunteer fire departments, each of which is involved with its residents in helping with WUI issues. Some volunteer fire departments assist homeowners in using prescribed fire to reduce fuels. The Bastrop City Volunteer Fire Department responds to fires within the city and adjoining county areas, which include several subdivisions. This fire station is efficiently equipped for wildland fires, including brush engines, a tractor plow dozer unit (used to cut plow lines), and a rescue boat. A second fire station was due to open in 2003 in Tahitian Village and would be equipped with similar machinery.



*Bastrop County helps purchase fire equipment for its 13 volunteer fire departments.*

After the 1998 fire season, the county approved a budget of \$90,000 a year to help equip volunteer fire departments. The plan is to continue this level of spending each year. Under this program the county has purchased six new trucks and plans on purchasing two new trucks each year.

#### 4. State Support

Bastrop County is not alone in its wildfire preparedness activities, but benefits from strong and productive ties to State programs primarily led by TFS. For example:

**Living on the Edge** is a traveling interactive educational exhibit designed by TFS to raise awareness of the risk of wildfire and to show the types of preparedness activities that help reduce this risk. This exhibit has been presented at fairs, home and garden shows, festivals, and other community events. In 2001, it reached more than 150,000 people.



*Living on the Edge is an education exhibit aimed at raising wildfire risk awareness and teaching fire preparedness activities. (Picture from <http://txforestservation.tamu.edu/>)*

**The Industrial Helping Hands Program** provides avenues to make used firefighting equipment from the private sector available to volunteer fire departments. Impetus for this program stemmed from the hesitancy of industry to give used equipment to volunteer fire departments because of liability issues. Recent legislation enables industries to give used equipment to TFS for redistribution without any liability in case the equipment malfunctions. So far, TFS has received and distributed equipment worth \$25 million.

**The Texas Rural Volunteer Fire Department Assistance Program** is a cost-share program funded by the Texas State Legislature. It provides funding to rural volunteer fire departments for acquiring firefighting vehicles, fire and rescue equipment, protective clothing, county fire radio systems, dry-hydrants, computer systems, and firefighter training. Approximately \$14 million will be distributed annually under the program.



*The Texas Forest Service plays an important role in wildfire management and education. (picture from <http://txforestservation.tamu.edu/>)*

#### 5. Training

Since the 1998 fire season, TFS has been instrumental in establishing, coordinating, and sponsoring a premier wildfire training academy. This academy emphasizes prescribed burning and WUI issues and offers National Wildfire Coordinating Group courses. This training is held in Bastrop County at Camp Swift (National Guard facility) and attracts firefighters from across the Nation. The 2002 academy had over 700 registrations from 32 States and Canada.

#### 6. Other Educational Initiatives

Several additional events help educate landowners and promote cooperation among citizens, fire departments, and other organizations in the area.



*Local fire departments display their equipment at Fire Fest (Picture from <http://www.cityofbastrop.org>)*

For example:

**FireCAP (Fire-Citizens' Advisory Panel):** This advisory panel was established in 1999 as a mechanism to increase citizen support for rural volunteer fire departments. Some programs sponsored by FireCAP include education festivals (Wal-Mart sponsored a rally that displayed firefighting equipment), wildfire mitigation projects, and fire danger signs.

**Fall Fire Fest:** This annual Bastrop County event is held in autumn right before National Fire Prevention Week and is co-sponsored by TFS. Its intent is to heighten wildfire awareness and promote preparedness activities through games, demonstrations, and exhibits. Overview maps of the region help citizens plan emergency evacuation routes. Local fire departments display their equipment, introduce their volunteers, and answer citizens' questions.

### Preparing for Wildfire: Lessons for Other Communities from Bastrop

1. Understand and identify factors that contribute to increased risk from wildfire; develop wildfire mitigation programs to reduce those risks.
2. Avoid "scare tactics." Develop educational programs that empower and motivate citizens to make their own decisions about preparedness activities.
3. Publicize volunteer fire departments in the community and develop strong connections between fire departments and residents.
4. Strengthen networks between various organizations and businesses in the community to build coordination and support for each other's initiatives.

5. Lobby to increase the budget for firefighting; enable volunteer fire departments to have access to used equipment.
6. Organize programs like Mulchfest that both reduce fuel and reduce mulch.
7. Involve everyone in the community in fire preparedness initiatives thereby increasing linkages within the community.

## Web Sites for More Information on Tahitian Village and Bastrop

Texas Forest Service: <http://txforestservicetamu.edu/>

Texas Interagency Coordination Center: <http://www.tamu.edu/ticc>

City of Bastrop: <http://www.cityofbastrop.org/>

Tahitian Village Subdivision: <http://www.tahitianvillage.com/>

North Central Research Station, USDA Forest Service: <http://www.ncrs.fs.fed.us>



◀ *Narrow roads and dangerous intersections add to Tahitian Village's susceptibility to wildfire.*



*Tahitian Village, a subdivision of Bastrop, is known for its beautiful scenery and homes, but also has a high fire risk due to unmanaged fuel.*

Unless otherwise noted, photos are by Martha Monroe or Shruti Agrawal, University of Florida.

## The Wildfire Preparedness Project of the National Fire Plan

Communities across the U.S. have voiced increasing concern about how they can better prepare for wildfire. Even in areas of the country not traditionally thought of as having high fire risk, storms, changing climate, and pest/disease outbreaks have increased concern about the potential for catastrophic fire. In areas where fire is viewed as a natural part of the ecosystem, the fact that more and more people choose these places to live in means that there is a potential for major fire impacts. A team of scientists funded by the National Fire Plan have been visiting communities across the country to identify the activities communities are undertaking to increase wildfire preparedness and to identify the resources necessary to support these activities. The project is led by the North Central Research Station, in cooperation with the Pacific Northwest Research Station, University of Florida, University of Minnesota, and Southern Oregon University.

This is one in a series of summaries reflecting findings of the case studies. Hard copies of this summary can be obtained from the individuals listed below. All case study summaries currently available can be found on the Web at:

[www.ncrs.fs.fed.us/4803/Highlights.htm](http://www.ncrs.fs.fed.us/4803/Highlights.htm)

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Managing the Impact of Wildfires on the  
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