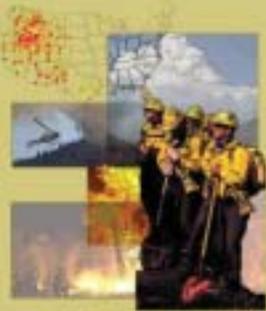


Gunflint Trail Community Steps to Improve Community Preparedness for Wildfire

Community Preparedness Case Study Series

Case Study #1

June 2002



The Gunflint Trail

People flock to the Arrowhead Region of Minnesota to live, work, and recreate in the Northwoods. The Gunflint Trail provides access to some of the region's most beautiful and isolated campgrounds, resorts, summer cabins, and homes. Running 62 miles northwest of Grand Marais, Minnesota, the Trail ends at Seagull Lake and the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, the most popular wilderness area in the U.S.



Fire has always been a critical part of this landscape—flaring up from lightening strikes to run through the forests until stopped by weather or the natural fuel breaks provided by lakes and exposed rock surfaces. Every year, the Gunflint Trail Volunteer Fire Department, USDA Forest Service, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, and other partners fight numerous fires along the Trail. A major windstorm in 1999 blew down trees on more than 600 square miles of forest land in the region, increasing fuel loads significantly and further focusing the community's attention on wildfire preparedness.

Keys to wildfire preparedness on the Gunflint Trail

Know your "place"

Nearly 2,500 people live along the Gunflint, of which more than 1,800 are seasonal residents. Many of these residents are very savvy about their landscape. They know the fire history of the area and understand the role of fire in their ecosystem. They have thought about the implications of the 1999 blowdown in a fire-prone ecosystem such as theirs. They have identified how their isolation impacts their ability to protect homes and businesses from wildfire. They recognize that being "a peninsula in a sea of public land" means that they need to build partnerships for wildfire management. This knowledge enables them to understand, undertake, and support activities to increase fire preparedness.

Use existing networks and relationships for wildfire preparedness

There was no need to invent new networks or relationships to increase community preparedness for wildfire. Members of area lakeshore owner associations, the Gunflint Trail Association (made up of local business owners) and Gunflint Trail Volunteer Fire Department (GTVFD) have worked together over the years on a variety of projects to improve the quality of life along the Trail. Because of these previously existing networks, it was relatively easy to educate people about wildfire, and bring them together for a variety of activities aimed at increasing wildfire preparedness.



Build on local knowledge and skills

Residents along the Gunflint have, or have access to, knowledge and skills that increase wildfire preparedness. For example, a volunteer firefighter used his knowledge of state rules and regulations regarding qualifications and benefits for firefighters to stabilize the pool of firefighters on the Gunflint by offering an improved benefits package. A resident enlisted a relative in the management of retirement funds for the GTVFD. Another volunteer firefighter used information provided by government sources to research, adapt and install sprinkler protection systems for structures along the Gunflint Trail. These examples illustrate what was referred to several times as Gunflint residents' "can do" attitude.



It is hoped that sprinkler systems, installed on homes and/or around property, will reduce losses from wildfire. (Photo courtesy of Wildfire Sprinkler, Inc.)

Develop key partnerships within the community—a message to public agencies

Public agencies, responsible for managing forest land adjacent to the homes and businesses along the Trail, have learned the importance of building relationships and maintaining an open door policy.

Agency representatives found they were more effective working as part of a team involving community business leaders and residents—being able to show a united front on wildfire preparedness increased acceptance and participation in wildfire preparedness activities and programs. Public agency staff were a visible presence at community activities and functions, helping to create ties between the agencies and residents. As a result of these efforts and the openness of the residents, trust grew between agency representatives and residents. This trust is critical in emergencies where each unit must carry out its responsibilities in a quick and effective manner.

Recognize wildfire preparedness as a process, not a product

People who have been involved in activities to improve wildfire preparedness along the Gunflint Trail recognize that these actions are part of a larger process of taking responsibility for the choices they've made regarding where they live and work—in an isolated area, surrounded by wilderness, where there are frequent fires. This process does not end with creating defensible space, improving access, or installing sprinkler systems, but includes a variety of ongoing activities that create or enhance partnerships necessary to survival along the Gunflint.

What's Next for the Gunflint Trail?

People we talked to along the Gunflint Trail suggested several activities that would help residents maintain or improve wildfire preparedness:

Practice implementing evacuation and other plans related to wildfire

Regularly hold evacuation drills, "tabletop exercises," and other activities where landowners and firefighters can practice what they will need to do if a wildfire threatens the community.

Educate new land and business owners about wildfire

Gunflint residents who have experienced wildfires are motivated to take action to increase wildfire preparedness. In the absence of experience, knowledge of the fire history of the region can also help "sell" wildfire preparedness. New Gunflint residents should receive educational materials on defensible space, the role of fire in the northwoods, and other topics that reflect the realities of living in this place in this landscape.



Watch for human burnout

Many people involved in improving the Gunflint Trail's wildfire preparedness have been on the job for several years, and are becoming burned out. Folks need to plan for transferring leadership and increasing the number of people involved in wildfire management.

Bring in new programs that build on accomplishments

Gunflint Trail residents are finding ways to enhance wildfire preparedness by using existing programs to build on what they've already accomplished. For example, they are adapting principles from the FIREWISE program to ecological and social conditions found along the Trail. FIREWISE principles include recommendations regarding defensible space, building materials, and access. Finding programs that are new to the community, but that build on what has already been developed, is one way to keep people engaged in efforts to increase wildfire preparedness and maintain enthusiasm.

Preparing for Wildfire: Lessons for Other Communities from the Gunflint Trail

1. Develop homeowner wildfire preparedness packets, or adapt existing educational materials so that they are specific to your community.
2. Take steps to "professionalize" your volunteer fire department through training, benefits, and recognition.
3. Encourage local residents to take the lead in wildfire preparedness activities, supported by county, State or Federal agencies.
4. Use existing business and landowner associations as the backbone of your wildfire preparedness program.
5. Make existing public programs work for you.
6. Ask for help (money, materials, and time) from all community members.



Web Sites for More Information on the Gunflint Trail and Wildfire Preparedness

Boreal Access—community Web server for Cook County, Minnesota: www.boreal.org

FIREWISE: www.firewise.org

Gunflint Trail Association (business association): www.gunflint-trail.com

Gunflint Trail Volunteer Fire Department: www.gunflint911.org

Minnesota Department of Natural Resources: www.dnr.state.mn.us

USDA Forest Service, Superior National Forest: www.superiornationalforest.org

Logos are from the web sites of the Gunflint Trail Volunteer Fire Department and Gunflint Trail Association. Unless otherwise noted, photos are from the USDA Forest Service.

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 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 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 the first 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

For more information contact:

Pam Jakes
North Central Research
Station
651 649-5163
pjakes@fs.fed.us



Kristen Nelson
College of Natural
Resources
612 624-1277
kcn@umn.edu

