Red Lodge, Montana
Steps to Improve Community Preparedness for Wildfire

Community Preparedness Case Study Series

Case Study #13

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Red Lodge, Carbon County, Montana

Red Lodge, one of the gateways to Yellowstone National Park, annually welcomes 1.2 million visitors seeking recreational opportunities and natural beauty. This small community of 2,200 serves as the county seat for Carbon County, population 9,600. Quality of life and small-town spirit have drawn new residents and returning natives who are valued for their talents, new ideas, and civic contributions.

Red Lodge is located adjacent to the Beartooth Ranger District of the Custer National Forest (USDA Forest Service). The District's forests are dominated by lodgepole pine. Stunted by overcrowding, these forests are ready for a stand replacement fire but one has not occurred since the early 1900s. The climate is dry, averaging 22 inches of rainfall, and summer winds drive wildfires quickly across the landscape. In 2000, the 1,500-acre Willie Fire alerted the community, providing a "teachable moment" to prepare for the next wildfire.

Keys to Wildfire Preparedness in Red Lodge

Homeowners' associations

The 400 Ranch is a "poster child" for fuel reduction and defensible space. The ranch consists of a cluster of cabins on a land corporation, which was narrowly missed by the Willie Fire. Before the fire, work had begun to improve preparedness, including widening roads for fire truck access and reducing fuel loads around cabins and up to 200 feet into bordering national forest lands. Most of the ranch's 70 cabins are summer retreats, but an increasing number of residents remain year-round. These residents contribute to the collective effort of fire preparedness, applying for National Fire Plan grants to supplement homeowner assessments for thinning, burning, and chipping.

Situated on the Beartooth Highway, Red Lodge is one of the gateways to Yellowstone National Park.

USDA Forest Service recreation residences

Because the Custer National Forest is obligated to provide fire protection on Federal lands, its special use cabins, located in dense lodgepole pine, create nightmares for the Custer's Fire Management Officer. The Forest Service is designing a hazardous fuel reduction project to lessen the threat of wildfire to a number of recreation residence tracts, mapping defensible spaces around cabins, and seeking funding to reduce vegetation. Ninety cabin owners have been asked to participate in the risk-reduction project; so far, about 20 have shown interest.

Red Lodge is located on the Beartooth Ranger District of the Custer National Forest.

Evacuation plans and fuel breaks

The traffic jams during evacuation for the Willie Fire galvanized the Local Area Emergency Planning Committee to set up an evacuation plan. The Forest Service is creating a demonstration fuel break across lands it administers with the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks. The break extends defense lines created during the Willie Fire to better protect nearby homes and enhance elk forage. Red Lodge Mountain Resort, the local ski area, is protecting its lands and viewshed with a thinning and shaded fuel break project.

Then District Ranger Rand Herzberg was essential to community preparedness activities in Red Lodge. (Photo courtesy of Carbon County News)

Regulations

The county fire council has worked with the county commissioners to create subdivision regulations that increase fire safety in wildland-urban interface areas. These regulations require less steep, wider roads and turnarounds for fire trucks; recently, a subdivision proposal was denied due to fire safety concerns. The city is following suit, requiring sprinkler installation on homes in wooded areas. Local Forest Service managers continue to work with the county commissioners, briefing them before each fire season and weekly during the season.

Relationships

The District Ranger and rural fire chief, local leaders in fire prevention, recognize that regulations are important, but relationships are key. "If you make good relationships there's a lot you can accomplish." As partners, they present a unified front, networking with other community leaders and earning public credibility. They know that homeowners' personal choices about their property are influenced less by regulation than by education and persuasion.

Collaboration has been a necessity among fire agencies who share or trade equipment and respond to one another's fires. Red Lodge now has a 5-year resource-sharing contract between the city and rural fire departments. This contract reduces the duplication of vehicles and allows agencies to pool resources to get new equipment; in the past they shared only headquarters and volunteer firefighters. The budgets of local volunteer fire departments are supplemented by mutual-aid agreements and contracts with the Forest Service to provide first-response firefighters and equipment. The Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) also has a close relationship with Carbon County's rural fire departments and the Beartooth District, providing wildland fire training in winter, and providing organizational and financial assistance should wildfires exceed the county's capabilities to control them with local resources. The Bureau of Land Mangement is also an important wildland firefighting partner to the rural fire districts and all of the communities of Carbon County.

New regulations regarding development are meant to avoid access conditions like those shown on the left and guarantee access conditions like those shown on the right.

Next Steps

Cabins built in dense stands of lodgepole pine are a nightmare for fire management officers.

Part-time residents present the greatest challenge to neighborhoods working to reduce fuel loads. They have just a few weeks to enjoy their vacation homes, so clearing brush and trees is not a high priority for them. Getting permission from owners and leaseholders to clear around their cabins and funding fuel reduction programs are significant next steps. Using National Fire Plan grants, the DNRC Southern Land Office will pay $100 for each fire department-conducted home audit for fire danger; they also provide cost-share grants for individuals to create defensible space and serve as demonstration home sites.

As memories of the Willie Fire fade, residents turn to other priorities. Fewer people are attending public meetings sponsored by the fire protection agencies, so the wildfire message needs to be carried wherever people will listen. Innovators such as the 400 Ranch and fuel reduction projects across both private and public lands can be publicized as models and reminders.

Preparing for Wildfire: Lessons for Other Communities from Red Lodge

1. Leadership—Find, develop, and keep key leaders in the community. Because of their long-term involvement in civic affairs, Red Lodge's wildfire protection leaders are well respected and listened to by government officials and citizens, alike.

2. Communication—Remembering daily briefing sessions for the Willie Fire, Red Lodge residents still count on the Forest Service to keep them "tuned in" to fire dangers. Local avenues of communication—the local newspaper, radio station, and post office—carry the "prepare for wildfire" message each season.

3. Cooperation—The well-networked community mobilizes for cooperation on many fronts; wise fire leadership uses these community networks. Cooperating fire agencies build relationships, share resources and information, and minimize turf wars.

4. Civic Spirit—Proud of their heritage, scenic splendor, and close-knit town, community members rallied to help those evacuated during the Willie Fire, and know they may be needed again. Social pressure can encourage homeowners to invest in fuel reduction as a civic responsibility.

Local residents expressed their appreciation to firefighters following the Willie Fire. (Photo courtesy of Carbon County News)

Web Sites for More Information About Red Lodge and Wildfire Preparedness

Red Lodge: http://www.redlodge.com

Custer National Forest, USDA Forest Service: http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/custer

Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation: http://www.dnrc.state.mt.us

National Fire Plan: http://www.fireplan.gov

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

Bureau of Land Management and Montana State Office: http://www.mt.blm.gov

Unless otherwise noted, photos from Victoria Sturtevant, Southern Oregon University.

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

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