

# Firewise in the Wildland/Urban Interface and Firewise Communities/USA

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*“Will Divide” – large tract of land in Baldwin County once owned by a major paper company.*

**H**ealthwise, travelwise, moneywise...and *Firewise*? Simply stated, *Firewise* is fire prevention. To a homeowner it means preventing fire by making the inside and outside of the home safe from fire hazards or identifying and minimizing hazardous situations which may cause structural fire. To a forest landowner/homeowner, *Firewise* means all of this, plus outside and beyond. To a homeowner in the wildland/urban interface (WUI), *Firewise* means making the home safe from wildland fire. In any case, *Firewise* looks at ways to prevent fires where possible and mitigate or lessen the hazards associated with fire spread and intensity, should a fire occur. The goal of *Firewise* is to prepare homes to withstand a wildland fire without the intervention of firefighters.

## Wildland/Urban Interface (WUI)

The term wildland/urban interface describes the “meeting” of different land uses. For instance, natural or managed forestland or rangeland may join developed urban or suburban areas. This interface might be a wildland area meeting a community or subdivision, or an industrial area joining wildlands.

Wildfire has always been a natural part of many of the areas where we live. In fact, long before Europeans settled here, many forests were burned as a result of lightning and indigenous wildfires. As areas populate in modern times, accidental fire from escaped control burns and debris fires becomes more prevalent. And don't forget arson, our single biggest

cause of wildfire. As more and more people choose to live in the wildland/urban interface, it is important to make sure they understand the nature of their surroundings, including the dangers and patterns of wildfire.

There are many homes and communities being built without regard to the wildfire history or fuel conditions in and around the forest. Dense population in these areas increases the chance of wildfire. Therefore, great potential exists for loss of life, property, and ecological values due to fuel conditions located in the wildland/urban interface.

## Forest Fragmentation

During the past ten years, forest ownership has experienced the biggest change since the late 1940s to early 1950s when the pulp and paper companies began buying large tracts of land to support their mills. There have been drastic changes in the corporate climate of the pulp and paper industry. Many large mills have closed; acquisitions, mergers, and leveraged buy-outs were almost daily news during the turn of the new century. Expensive mill modernization in order to meet environmental and production goals have influenced mill closure in some companies. Many companies have moved their resource and production assets to foreign countries with cheaper labor and environmental costs. As a result, several large companies sold their mill's land base.

Enter fragmentation – subdivision – development. Suddenly, the wildland/urban interface broadens. Large tracts of

timberland that were once managed (undeveloped but periodically thinned, harvested, prescribed burned, and protected from the spread of insects and disease) are now being divided and developed. For example, a 640-acre section of land that once had a single landowner with one management philosophy might now have twenty or more owners. Forest firefighters and firemen are now finding new challenges in dealing with 20 acres and a house, 10 acres and a house, 1 acre and a house, as well as associated roads, driveways, low weight limit bridges, cul-de-sacs, structures, utility lines, and fences. Enter *Firewise*.

Auburn University's Center for Forest Sustainability, in cooperation with the USDA Forest Service and the National Science Foundation, led a conference in Atlanta to explore the challenges and opportunities created by wildland/urban interfaces. Various sorts of issues of interest were presented to a wide spectrum of individuals, especially those charged with urban planning and others dealing with aspects of urban sprawl.

## Firewise Communities/USA

The *Firewise Communities/USA* Recognition Program enables communities in all parts of the U.S. to achieve a high level of protection against wildland/urban interface fire as well as sustainable ecosystem balance. It is sponsored by the National WUI Fire Program. *Firewise Communities/USA* encourages and acknowledges action that minimizes home loss to wildfire in fire-prone com-

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munities. The recognition program involves a coordinated effort by the community members.

Communities in fire-prone areas can earn *Firewise Communities/USA* status by working with local fire professionals and by observing the following standards:

- Enlist a WUI specialist to complete an assessment and create a plan that identifies locally agreed-upon solutions that the community can implement.
- Sponsor a local *Firewise* board which maintains the *Firewise* Community program and tracks its progress.
- Observe a *Firewise Communities/USA* Day each spring that is dedicated to a local *Firewise* project.
- Invest a minimum of \$2.00 annually per capita in local *Firewise Communities/USA* efforts (in-kind government employees or volunteers' time and equipment, as well as state/federal grants dedicated to that purpose can be used toward meeting this minimum).
- Submit an annual report to *Firewise Communities/USA*, documenting continuing compliance with the program.

In some areas, grant money is available for communities to do fire planning and mitigation.

## Partners in *Firewise Communities/USA*

*Firewise* is a national initiative designed to reach beyond the fire service by involving homeowners, community leaders, planners, developers, and others to protect people and property from the ravages of wildfire – before a fire starts.

Thirty people from Alabama participated in a *Firewise Community/USA* conference last summer in Birmingham, to learn how to conduct fire hazard assessments.

Both paid and volunteer fire departments (VFDs) are major participants when fighting any fire in their jurisdiction. Saving lives is their highest priority, not only the safety of citizens but also of the firefighters. While volunteer firefighters take great pride in doing their jobs and are trained to respond to a variety of emergency situations, they are not full-

time paid firefighters. VFDs and municipal fire departments are constantly revising their emergency plans to deal with fire protection in the interface. Residents should take a more responsible role in protecting their own property and sharing the effort in making the community safer.

The Alabama Forestry Commission (AFC) began efforts to address fire prevention in the WUI in 1988 by encouraging formation of WUI councils and requesting the larger municipal and regional planners to consider fire protection in their land use planning and development ordinances.

The Jefferson-Shelby County WUI Council, formed in 1993, was Alabama's first coordinated WUI effort. Since then, this council has developed several



Photo by Stanley Anderson

brochures and other literature to inform the public about fire prevention and home protection in the interface. The council has also trained hundreds of firefighters and land management professionals in National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) courses through the Wildland Fire Academy. Alabama's first *Firewise Community/USA*, English Trace in the town of Clay in Jefferson County, was initiated through the efforts of the Jefferson-Shelby WUI Council. The council's latest undertaking is a grassroots educational and outreach program in the Cahaba River study area.

The Southwest Alabama WUI Advisory Council organized in 2001, serving Baldwin and Mobile Counties. This council purchased a portable tabletop education display and Smokey Bear costume to help educate school children and inform the public about *Firewise*.

Elected officials in Mobile and Baldwin counties were informed about the wildfire situation in their area and briefed on WUI and *Firewise* opportunities. The council also presented WUI information to regional planners. A draft model of planning and development ordinances will be presented to regional planners at the next strategic planning conference.

The Gulf Coast Resource and Development Council is in the process of establishing a *Firewise* community in Mobile, Baldwin, or Escambia County. The Council has proposed to identify a community at risk, prepare a wildland fire assessment, develop a mitigation plan, and pay for the cost of carrying out the mitigation work. The goal is to establish a base of support to propel the community toward achieving *Firewise Community/USA* recognition in the near future.

The Alabama TREASURE Forest Association (ATFA) has accomplished WUI familiarization in almost every ATFA county chapter. To assist in accomplishing this, AFC personnel presented a fire prevention training session to ATFA county chapter members raising awareness of ways to lessen the effects of wildfire on their property and homes.

Another great partner, Smokey Bear came along sixty years ago with the fire prevention message, "Only You..." Smokey's message is as valuable in wildfire prevention today as ever.

## What the AFC is Doing

The Alabama Forestry Commission takes a proactive role in informing the public about the responsibilities of fire prevention in the wildland/urban interface to reduce wildland fires and structural losses. The AFC has two employees dedicated to fire prevention and wildland/urban interface programs: one is based in north Alabama at Florence, and the other in south Alabama at Bay Minette.

Targeted fire prevention plans have been prepared for the ten Alabama counties with the highest fire occurrence. General fire prevention plans were prepared for the moderate fire occurrence

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# Fortenberrys Honored with Moody Award

**G**ary and Shirley Fortenberry of Choctaw County were recently honored with the Alabama TREASURE Forest Association's *Bill Moody Award*. It is given to honor individuals and/or groups who have made significant contributions to the advancement of the TREASURE Forest Program and the Alabama TREASURE Forest Association (ATFA). The award was presented in October at the 2004 Alabama Landowners and TREASURE Forest Conference in Tuscaloosa.

The Bill Moody Award is given in honor of former State Forester Bill Moody who is considered by many to be the "father" of the TREASURE Forest Program. He was also the founder of the State Forester's Advisory Board that later became the Alabama TREASURE Forest Association. The award has been given each year by the ATFA since 1996.

Mr. Fortenberry is currently serving as Chairman of the Alabama Forestry Commission's Board of Commissioners. ♣



Photo by Elishia Johnson

Shirley and Gary Fortenberry

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counties. These plans outline specific actions and timelines to accomplish a higher level of forest fire prevention. Regional fire prevention specialists and county managers will develop and implement these plans with guidance from the Fire Division and regional foresters.

The Commission has upgraded three helicopter water buckets and enhanced coordination with the Alabama Army National Guard flight facilities to provide water "drops" on wildfires in inaccessible areas and high intensity fires in interface situations.

Hurricane Ivan created even more challenges and opportunities for forest fire prevention. Every county was affected to some extent, but eight counties in particular were specifically identified to receive extraordinary mitigation attention.

The AFC brought in an out-of-state, NWCG-recognized, three-man team of Certified Fire Behavior Analysts to look at fuel types and timber damage caused by Ivan. Their task was to assess significant alterations to fuel types, look at potential fire behavior, and recommend ways to deal with the changes caused by Ivan. The Commission will use this analysis to enhance prevention efforts, readiness, and operations.

One post-Ivan mitigation tool is the program to rehabilitate firebreaks and forest access roads. The AFC has implemented a pre-suppression access program to provide this service to landowners who qualify. Ten additional Commission

firefighters received training on the operation of the AFC's three John Deere 750 dozers. These rangers will supplement the mitigation, rehabilitation, and fire-fighting efforts in the counties most affected by the hurricane by serving on fire mitigation and suppression teams.

Commission fire prevention teams are also being used to accomplish door-to-door contact, leaving literature developed specifically to publicize the Hurricane Ivan fire prevention message, while Ivan's destruction is still evident.

A media blitz is currently underway to capture the attention of citizens and communities most affected by the hurricane. Radio, television, and newspapers will publicize the AFC's message, presenting tips and stories about fire prevention.

Also, the informative and colorful 'Living with Fire' newspaper inserts that circulated statewide in 2004 were re-run in four counties.

### What Can You Do?

Maintain your property to high standards and continue to mitigate hazards on your own property and in your neighborhood. Service your fire breaks and conduct prescribed burns in a safe and responsible manner.

The average person has no concept of how dangerous wild-fire can be – share the fol-

lowing fire prevention and mitigation tips with others. Continue to be aware of community growth, subdivision development, and fragmentation issues affecting property boundaries. Encourage your ATFA county chapter and other organizations to support the establishment of *Firewise Communities/USA* in your area. Everyone benefits when you use opportunities to educate your community on becoming more *Firewise*.

### Conclusion

Homeowners and landowners must accept personal responsibility for learning to live compatibly with natural elements found in the wildland/urban interface – including fire. Your role as a fire prevention advocate will be a tremendous help. ♣

### Firewise Tips for Homeowners

- Create a buffer zone (defensible space) between forest vegetation and the home.
- Use fire-resistant building materials and roofing.
- Safely store firewood, propane tanks, and other fuels.
- Keep lawns mowed and leaves raked.
- Clean roof and gutters of leaves, needles, and dead limbs.

### References and Suggested Readings:

[www.sfws.auburn.edu/urbanruralinterfaces](http://www.sfws.auburn.edu/urbanruralinterfaces)  
[www.firewise.org](http://www.firewise.org)  
[www.forestry.state.al.us](http://www.forestry.state.al.us)  
 WUI on-line course: [www.usfa.fema.gov/applications/nfacsd/display](http://www.usfa.fema.gov/applications/nfacsd/display)