

FOREWORD

Many years ago, early in my career, I stopped to issue a fire permit to a lady whose farm was on the edge of an old burn. It was early spring, and she had been piling yard debris from the old burn by hand. As I was writing the permit, she gazed across her yard towards the river valley and started talking about the fire that had burned over her property nine years earlier.

As she spoke, I realized that she was reliving the event. She described the thick, rolling, black smoke, and seeing fire spotting across the valley. Several hours later, she recalled, the fire was roaring unabated towards them. The sky was dark from the smoke, even though it was mid-day and flames were licking their property.

She described how they managed to get their livestock out and gathered a few things before they left in a swirl of hot ash and embers. When the family returned in dread a few days later, nothing was left. The fire had taken everything. Equipment, fences, buildings, seed, forage, their home, and even their kids' bicycles had burned. Nine years later, they were still rebuilding. As she took the permit from my hand, she looked across the valley of fire-killed trees and quietly said, "It was so beautiful..."

The impact of wildfire is devastating and long-term. Some people never really recover from its effects. Wildfire does not recognize jurisdictional or political boundaries, does not care if you are wealthy or poor, and does not wait until you have resolved interagency differences or until your response training is completed and your equipment is ready.

Wildfire responds quickly to fuels whether they are in the forest, in your community, or in your yard. It burns flammable grasses, shrubs, brush, trees, and—if given the chance—our homes. Wildfire can devastate communities and reduce dreams to ashes.

It is critical that we recognize that fire is part of the natural ecosystems that we are building in, that fire has occurred there in the past, and will occur again in the future. We can no longer wait and expect that fire departments or wildfire agencies will simply protect our communities. This does not mean that we can't live in or near interface areas. If we plan our communities and build our homes with the threat of wildfire as a key consideration, we can significantly reduce the risk that wildfire poses.

To make a community FireSmart takes more than a single project, initiative or effort. More often, making a community FireSmart involves a series of projects by individuals, groups, or agencies.

It is not a one-time campaign, either. It takes a continuous effort by all who have a stake in the community or could be affected by wildfire.

Municipal bylaws and architectural standards that discourage the use of flammable building materials, and the work of municipal planners, homeowners and others all contribute to create effective FireSmart communities.

Many hands do make light work. We all have a responsibility when it comes to the wildland/urban interface. That includes homeowners, municipal planners and authorities, developers, fire suppression personnel and many others. Now is the time to reduce the threat of wildfire to your homes and communities, not when the fire is at your doorsteps.

Be proactive, be practical, and be FireSmart!

Rick Arthur
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