



A CALL TO END THE DESTRUCTION OF COMMUNITIES BY WILDFIRE

Policy 5: The public must understand its role and take action in reducing wildfire risk

Over the past decade, the U.S. has witnessed a steady increase in wildfire activity. Experts predict this trend will continue. Despite billions of dollars to support wildland fire suppression efforts, the number of homes lost in wildfires per year has increased by 163 percent, and wildfires now cost the U.S. an estimated \$63 to \$285 billion per year in losses.

Nearly 45 million homes currently exist in the wildland/urban interface (WUI), with more people moving to areas of wildfire risk every year. It's therefore critical that these individuals take action to help protect their homes and communities from wildfires. The majority of homeowners, however, are not sufficiently informed or ready to take the action needed for wildfire safety. In fact, as the primary focus remains on fire suppression, many members of the public may not even realize they have a role to play, and are likely unaware that 64 percent of U.S. fire departments report they could manage structure protection for a maximum of two to five structures during a single wildfire incident. More than half of fire departments, 52 percent, report they could manage, at a maximum, responding to a wildfire event of just 1 to 10 acres. Members of the public must ready their homes and their families to be safe from wildfire.

While action at the individual level is key, leadership from all levels of government can help create a more informed public ready to take the steps needed to minimize loss from wildfire. Initiatives including educating residents on ignition-resistant home improvements and property mitigation, supporting the development of a trusted workforce homeowners can look to for mitigation guidance and labor, funding social science research to better understand human behavior in the context of disasters, and ensuring people know what actions to take when there is a wildfire will not only save lives and property, it will also reduce the burden on first responders.

To reduce wildfire risk, the public must understand the concept of the "home ignition zone." Years of scientific research supports the prescription of removing fuel sources from the area immediately around the home. Doing this reduces the risk of home ignition from embers or radiant heat. Simple, low-cost steps such as clearing dead leaves, debris, and pine needles from roofs and gutters, keeping grasses mowed, removing stored flammable items from underneath decks or porches, and similar maintenance are accessible to most homeowners. Other actions, like replacing flammable roof material, installing double-paned windows, and clearing dry vegetation from the property, reduce risk even further.

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Government at all levels can help motivate this change through consistent messaging to citizens about the benefits of and urgent need for taking the steps described above. Voluntary programs that provide this type of education and encourage action are foundational to building resiliency capacity in communities and encouraging action on the individual level. The resources and support provided through third parties, like NFPA Firewise USA® and the Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network, are critical. To date, there are nearly 2,000 Firewise communities throughout the U.S. However, the need to reach all 70,000 communities at risk means these efforts must continue. In addition, all states should not only increase their efforts to educate and advise property owners, but also pursue partners to expand their reach and presence within communities.

Messaging to homeowners is a necessary first step to reducing risk in the WUI. However, a skilled workforce could help assess homes and implement mitigation measures on a wider scale. States should develop training and certification pathways to develop this workforce, which today is lacking. With professionals to turn to, taking action will be even easier for homeowners. Furthermore, while acts like removing yard waste and clearing gutters may be relatively easy for many, policymakers must recognize that elderly people and those with disabilities may be less able to act on their own. Supporting this workforce is one means to facilitate action among all residents.

Finally, the effectiveness of persuading people to prepare for wildfires and to understand and follow directions from authorities during a wildfire can be enhanced with insights provided by social science. For example, recent research from the National Institute of Standards and Technology looked at factors that influenced people's evacuation decisions during the 2016 Chimney Tops 2 Fire in Tennessee that killed 14 people and injured over 200. The research findings highlight the critical importance of encouraging households to create evacuation plans and the need to help people more accurately understand their level of risk in these situations. Funding social science research can guide messaging and help authorities prioritize programmatic actions for convincing people to do what is needed to save lives and property.

Wildfire mitigation is most effective when all homes and properties in a community are ignition resistant. Given the size and scope of the U.S. wildfire challenge, reaching the goals of a comprehensive strategy, including raising more awareness and educating the public about their role in wildfire preparedness, will take time. But making progress toward all of these will reduce the risk to American homes, businesses, and prosperity. **The key to ending the destruction of communities by wildfire is to start now.**

Learn more about Outthink Wildfire by visiting nfpa.org/wildfirepolicy.

CITATIONS AND REFERENCES

www.nfpa.org/wildfirepolicy



RESOURCES

- [Firewise USA®](#)
- [Fire Adapted Communities \(FAC\)](#)

The National Fire Protection Association® (NFPA®) outlined a comprehensive strategy that will push for the transformations that, over time, will significantly reduce risk to communities. The strategy is rooted in two realities—wildfires are going to happen, and the fire service will not be able to extinguish wildfires at a pace to save people and property in their path.

To solve the wildfire problem, these five tenets must be supported by all levels of government:

- 1. Require all homes and businesses in the wildland/urban interface (WUI) to be more resistant to ignition from wildfire embers and flames.**
- 2. Current codes and standards, as well as sound land use practices, must be in use and enforced for new development and rebuilding in wildfire-prone areas.**
- 3. Fire departments for communities in the WUI must be prepared to respond safely and effectively to wildfire.**
- 4. Government must increase resources for vegetative fuel management.**
- 5. The public must understand its role and take action in reducing wildfire risk.**



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