

The Applegate Fire Plan

Steps to Improve Community Preparedness for Wildfire

Community Preparedness Case Study Series

Case Study #3

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The Applegate Valley

The Applegate watershed, located in southwestern Oregon and northern California, encompasses just under 500,000 acres of great ecological and social diversity, including 2 threatened species and over 12,000 people. Steep and rugged, ranging from 1,000 to 7,000 feet elevation, the watershed has a Mediterranean climate—dry, hot summers and wet, cool winters. Its many ownerships include residential lots, small woodland and hobby farms, industrial forests, and public lands—70% of the watershed is managed by the USDA Forest Service and the USDI Bureau of Land Management (BLM). At the heart of the watershed lies the town of Applegate.



Fire exclusion, logging, hydraulic mining, and drought have dramatically changed the composition and structure of the forest. The exclusion of fire over the last 80 years has had profound consequences for the ecosystem, including the loss of oak woodlands and large ponderosa pines. The park-like forests of the past have been replaced by dense forests of stunted trees, increasing the likelihood of insect infestation, disease, and high-intensity fire. The risk of catastrophic wildfire is compounded by the ever-increasing number of rural residential dwellings surrounded by dense, continuous vegetation in the forest interface.

Fire is no stranger to the Applegate Valley. Almost half of wildfires here are started on ridgetops by lightning; the rest, caused by humans, burn up from the valleys. The Quartz Fire in 2001 burned 6,160 acres and 3 houses, reminding the communities of their vulnerability and need for better emergency communication. The Squire Fire in 2002, at almost 3,000 acres, could have been an even greater threat to a neighborhood, but instead it showed the success of fuels reduction and emergency planning during the preceding year.

The Applegate Valley straddles two counties (Jackson and Josephine), is within easy reach of two cities (Medford and Grants Pass), and is made up of a number of small, unincorporated communities. A strong attachment to place unites old-timers, mid-timers, and newcomers, as do extensive informal and organizational networks. One of these organizations, the Applegate Partnership, has served as a place to find common ground and solutions for land management issues for a decade. With the Federal land management agencies, the Partnership successfully applied for National Fire Plan funding and lent leadership, organizational support, and its *Applegator* newsletter to the effort.



The Collaborative Fire Protection Strategy of the Applegate Communities



G. Wells

The Applegate Fire Plan is both process and product. The process is community-driven, yet 24 Federal, state, and county agencies contribute their staff expertise and support. For the agencies, the Plan solidifies a process that has been going on for decades: gathering information, balancing priorities, planning strategies, and cooperating across property lines—but this time the process is going on in dialogue and coordination with one another and community members. No one in the Partnership really knew what they were getting into when they embarked on the planning process; the going was tougher than any could imagine, but all are proud of the following outcomes.

Community Outreach and Education

Community participation and input into this plan have energized individuals and neighborhoods. Newsletters, meetings, potlucks, field trips, and demonstration sites have motivated and prepared residents for the next steps. Agency partners point to community ownership of the Plan as a major accomplishment.

Reference Guide

Agency scientists cooperated in providing information about fire ecology, risk, and fire hazard reduction and suppression. A local writer translated the scientists' technical writing into readable information for the broader community. The guide also provides instructions for emergency preparedness, including creating phone trees, and sources for further information, ranging from lists of forest consultants to public agency regulations to instructions for reporting a fire.



U.S. Bureau of Land Management

Fuel Reduction

Working from appraisals conducted by local fire departments, over 600 residents have improved defensible space and driveway access to their homes. National Fire Plan funding has been distributed to these landowners by the Oregon Department of Forestry to help cover the costs of fuel reduction on their properties. The Bureau of Land Management and private landowners have cooperated in thinning across ownership boundaries, sharing tools such as the

Slashbuster®.



A. Parsons

Neighborhood Mobilization

Plan coordinators attended over 40 meetings in living rooms where neighbors planned emergency communication strategies, discussed special needs and values at risk, and planned cooperation in work on their properties.

Agency Collaboration

Agencies with differing missions and cultures generated a single set of hazard maps, fuel reduction strategies, and fire suppression options. Cooperation across agency jurisdictions produced not only a cohesive plan, but also new working relationships to call upon later.

What's Next for the Applegate?

Implement the Plan, keeping it dynamic and responsive to new learning. The notebook format allows pages to be added and removed; pockets encourage before-and-after pictures.

Fine-tune neighborhood emergency preparedness and continually update phone trees. Propose to the Federal land management agencies neighborhood plans for integrated fuel reduction across ownership boundaries.



Seek and distribute continuing financial and technical assistance in defensible space work on private land.

Continue to reach out to neighborhoods who have not gotten on board.

Set in place social and ecological monitoring to document the impact of the Plan on the community and ecosystem.

Lessons for Other Communities from the Applegate

1. Diversify. Strength comes from diversity. Invite as many partners to the table as will come; everyone brings a different piece to the puzzle. If everyone's there, no one feels excluded.
2. Build ownership. Agencies and communities alike discovered they had a common problem, and it was worthwhile to participate in a process that benefits all. Shared ownership means shared responsibility.
3. Gather an array of leadership skills. Collaborative projects and products require a taskmaster, a coordinator, a facilitator, a cheerleader, and an ambassador.
4. Work at multiple levels and use multiple strategies for successful outreach. Ultimately, get to the neighborhood level to plan emergency preparedness, create fuel breaks, and build trust.
5. Start with a core group of people with demonstrated success at working across agency and community boundaries. Bring others on board after you've built a firm foundation.
6. Keep deadlines. A tight time frame gets the plan out before people lose interest.
7. Expect controversy. Although not as contentious as a timber sale, but some people will be distrustful and will not participate in neighborhood phone trees or they resist cutting trees on public or private land. Respect this need for privacy; participation must be voluntary.
8. Realize that it's a lot of work for both agency staff and community leaders, especially when nothing else is taken off their plates.



USDA Forest Service



G. Chandler



Web Sites for More Information on Applegate Fire Plan and its Partners

Applegate Fire Plan, Applegate Partnership and other Community Organizations: www.grayback.com

Applegate Rural Fire District #9: www.applegatefd.com/sta1.html

Bureau of Land Management, Medford District: www.or.blm.gov/Medford/

USDA Forest Service, Rogue River National Forest: www.fs.fed.us/r6/rogue/

USDA Forest Service, Siskiyou National Forest: www.fs.fed.us/r6/siskiyou/

Oregon Department of Forestry: www.odf.state.or.us

Jackson County: www.co.jackson.or.us

Josephine County: www.co.josephine.or.us

Mention of trade names does not constitute endorsement by the USDA Forest Service.
Unless otherwise noted, photos are 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 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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