

Utah Interagency Fire Information

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NATIONAL FIRE PLAN – HEALTHY FOREST INITIATIVE PAYS HUGE DIVIDEND

Fire Break Protects Utah Community

It's a tragic story, one heard all too frequently during recent fire seasons: wildfire sweeps through a community. Homes are destroyed and with them the family treasures of those who fled. Cherished pets die in the blaze. Sometimes people die.

That could have been the story of the small southwestern Utah town of Central had it not been for the combined efforts of the community working with state and federal agencies to prepare for the possibility of wildland fire. At about 4:00 p.m. on Thursday, August 12, lightning ignited the Cal Hollow Fire in pinyon and juniper woodland northwest of the town. On this hot, windy summer afternoon fire swept through the trees, hot embers blew on the wind, and it headed straight for the town. At 6:00 p.m. more than 100 households were evacuated.

This story could have ended like so many – except that this town was surrounded by a fuel break - a fuel break that was built as a cooperative effort by the people of Central and several state and federal agencies utilizing National Fire Plan dollars. Like many urban-interface communities, Central has state, private, Bureau of Land Management, and Forest Service land surrounding it. In order to buffer the community from wildland fires, all these groups worked as a team under a chartered organization called The Color Country Fuels and WUI Committee.

The result of that effort paid off big when the fire hit last week. The fuel break slowed the raging fire and “it laid down,” said Fire Warden Bill Murphy, “That gave us a chance to get the air tankers there. The fuel break was the key. When the fire moved into the crowns of the trees, I knew for sure we would have lost homes without it. It put the fire on the ground and gave us time.” By 10:00 p.m. the fire had been contained and residents returned to their homes. No one was hurt. No structures were lost.

The first to reach the fire was the Central Volunteer Fire Department with two wildland engines, appropriate personal protective equipment, and wildland training under their belts. Again, National Fire Plan money through the Rural Fire Assistance and

Volunteer Fire Assistance programs helped to prepare these volunteers for this fire by providing the equipment and training they needed.

“A few years ago, if a fire had started near Central, it would have easily crowned in the windy conditions typical of the area,” said District Ranger Bevan Killpack, “There was nothing to stop a fire from burning right through the town. And the people of Central wouldn’t have been able to tackle the fire. They weren’t prepared for wildland fires.”



Fuel break surrounding Central – fire entered the break and dropped to the ground.

Need met opportunity. President Bush’s Healthy Forest Initiative, launched in 2002, sought some projects that would demonstrate the use of streamlined environmental analysis to meet urgent needs for fuel reduction. Because Central was one of the top 10 “communities at risk” for wildfire in Utah, the Color Country Fuels and WUI Committee decided that the area would make an excellent choice.

Approval for the demonstration project was quickly obtained, but it took some talking to get homeowners to support it. “Fuel breaks are a little unsightly,” says Larry LaForte, local fire management officer for the Utah Division of Forestry, Fire, and State lands. “Many people liked the look of dense woodland right up against their property boundary.” Forest Service, BLM, and Utah State Forestry, Fire, and State lands employees partnered with the Community Fire Council to persuade homeowners of the need for a fuel break and defensible space around their homes. Reluctant homeowners were convinced.

Fred Fray, chairman of the Central Community Fire Council was one of the local leaders who worked tirelessly with homeowners, community leaders, and others to ensure their community was prepared, “The fire council not only agrees with the Healthy Forest Initiative goals, but has proven that it works.” said Fray.



The community of Central saved by its fuel break

The Healthy Forest Restoration Act was enacted by the Bush Administration to expand on National Fire Plan goals by helping counter the growing problem of catastrophic wildland fires in the West. “Communities like Central are sprouting up all over the nation in the wildland urban interface and are creating major fire hazards for people and property.” said BLM Cedar City Field Office Manager, Todd Christensen, “Creating defensible space both within and outside the community gave us the opportunity to succeed. This is what HFRA is all about.”

The streamlined analysis of the Central Fuel Break Project was completed in August of last year, and no one appealed. The State had already cut fuels breaks on their portion of the surrounding land when the Forest Service started work last fall. Homeowners removed brush and lopped trees around their homes. By spring, the communities were protected, although slash piles remained for disposal this winter. The BLM will complete its portion of the fuel break this fall.

“There are a lot of slash piles you won’t have burn this winter,” said Gerald Schiefer, assistant fire warden of Pine Valley. They had burned “fiercely” the night before.

Looking at Cyndi Sidles (fuels specialist for the Pine Valley Ranger District of the Dixie National Forest) the day after the fire, Schiefer continued, “Thank you for doing the fire break. It probably saved Central last night and it significantly slowed the fire. This allowed for defensive action for the homes... even though there was a good wind until the air drops could be made. You guys are our heroes.”

The agencies involved modestly decline the title of hero, but say they hope the survival of Central will motivate other people in other communities to support fuel reduction on neighboring public lands and in their own back yards.

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