

# Snapshots

Successes of BLM hazardous fuels projects ...

## Idaho

### FireSmart Program - A Model Approach

Kootenai County, Idaho is actively working with private landowners to help clear shrubs, brush, and trees away from homes to protect them from the kind of wildfires scorching thousands of acres in other parts of the country. An innovative program called FireSmart designed and implemented at the local level is already providing benefits.



*Thick northern Idaho vegetation added to potential for major wildfire.*

Located in northern Idaho, Kootenai County has over 130,000 residents, with approximately 80,000 living and/or working in the heavily forested areas.

Several years ago the Local Emergency Planning Committee identified wildfire as the primary disaster risk. The potential for fires destroying homes and entire communities is significant.

FireSmart was designed as part of the county's wildland urban interface fire mitigation plan. Grant money totaling \$1.9 million was obtained from a variety of sources including the Idaho Department of Lands, Bureau of Land Management, National Fire Plan, Idaho Bureau of Disaster Services, Kootenai County Disaster Services, Idaho Department of Commerce and USDA-U.S. Forest Service.

FireSmart established two major goals. First, to increase awareness of the risk of wildfire in the wildland urban interface areas of the county, and second to help homeowners learn how to protect their homes by creating a survivable space.

The program provides a one-time service to reduce dangerous fuels, and educates homeowners on other things they can do to protect their homes from wildfires.

The success of FireSmart is due to its development and administration through the Kootenai County Local Emergency Planning Committee. This committee includes

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*FireSmart planning and funding allows homeowners to reduce fuels and fire threat.*

representatives from various federal, state and local governmental entities, private businesses and citizens. Goals and objectives for the program were developed. An implementation plan was written, steering committee organized, and two personnel positions were identified and filled.

The committee recognized that a project manager with technical forestry and private business management skills would be needed to implement a start-up

program of such magnitude. They hired Larry Isenberg, who brings 27 years of forestry background to the job. He is the primary on-site contact with the residents and has completed site inspections on over 250 homes in the last six weeks. Also hired was Lori Barnes as Assistant Project Manager with strong public relations and project management background.

For homeowners, the first step is usually a phone call to the FireSmart office where Lori explains the program, determines if they will qualify and then sends them a packet of information, along with a form they have to fill out and return. Their home is placed on the list for site inspection. To increase the effectiveness of the program, individuals who call in are encouraged to ask their neighbors to participate with them. This has led to entire communities learning about the need to reduce the fuel near their homes.

As a result of this process, FireSmart is currently working with two different communities to develop a survivable space around the perimeter of each.

Larry meets with the individual homeowner or neighborhood group, explains the program, and walks around the home and



*A wildland urban interface home nearly obscured by vegetation.*

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property with them to identify the dangerous fuels that need to be removed. Together they mark the trees that will be left and indicate which ones to remove. Larry suggests other things they can do to protect their homes from wildfire, such as adding screening under low decks, moving firewood piles, replacing junipers near the home with fire-resistant plants, and cleaning roofs and gutters.



*FireSmart program that helped achieve a FireWise safe home.*

Fourteen local contractors ranging in size from a one-person operation, to a diversified business

with seven members, are used to help reduce fuels within 100 feet of the homes. The cost per home is from about \$800 to \$1,200. The cost is either paid for through the FireSmart program, or the homeowner is reimbursed for doing the work. As part of the program, homeowners agree to keep up the work for 10 years.

Larry explains, “The response from the homeowners is overwhelming. They are so appreciative of the help they are getting. They enthusiastically fix everything we recommend and do even more in many cases.”

The BLM Upper Columbia-Salmon Clearwater District in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho provided \$160,000 to Kootenai County in 2001 through an assistance agreement. This and other funding sources gave the FireSmart Kootenai County Program a kick-start as they began the fuel risk inventory and hazard assessment. An additional \$100,000 was provided by BLM in 2002 and helps fund the personnel to administer the program.

Brad Wagner, fuels technician in the Coeur d’Alene Field Office, has been an active steering committee member since the inception of the program. He said, “The committee researched numerous other programs throughout the country and incorporated all of the best ideas into one program. We feel we have a program that is top-notch.” He said, “The true measure of success is indicated by the number of other counties and communities that are looking at the FireSmart Kootenai County Program as a model.”

Shoshone, Benewah, and Bonner Counties in northern Idaho are also in the beginning stages of developing their county fire mitigation plans.

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