

8-1-2006

Extension at the Wildland-Urban Interface: A Case Study of Community Fire Planning

Max Bennett

Southern Oregon Research and Extension Center, max.bennett@oregonstate.edu

Gail Perrotti

Southern Oregon Research and Extension Center, gperrotti@earthlink.net



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Recommended Citation

Bennett, M., & Perrotti, G. (2006). Extension at the Wildland-Urban Interface: A Case Study of Community Fire Planning. *The Journal of Extension*, 44(4), Article 23. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol44/iss4/23>

This Ideas at Work is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Extension by an authorized editor of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.



August 2006 // Volume 44 // Number 4 // Ideas at Work // 4IAW7



PREVIOUS
ARTICLE



ISSUE
CONTENTS



NEXT
ARTICLE



Extension at the Wildland-Urban Interface: A Case Study of Community Fire Planning

Abstract

The recent nationwide emphasis on community fire planning provides an important new opportunity for Extension. This article presents a case study of Extension involvement in neighborhood fire planning. We describe how intensive neighborhood outreach, design, and delivery of educational programs and facilitation of a steering committee have improved neighborhood cohesion and interagency coordination in addressing wildfire issues in a 250,000-acre watershed.

Max Bennett

Forestry Agent

max.bennett@oregonstate.edu

Gail Perrotti

Project Coordinator

gperrotti@earthlink.net

Southern Oregon Research and Extension Center
Central Point, Oregon

Introduction

Extension plays an important role in reducing the threat of wildfire through design and delivery of educational materials and programs targeting wildland-urban interface residents (Monroe, Jacobson, & Bowers, 2003; Creighton, Baumgartner, & Gibbs, 2002). A complementary role, using Extension's expertise in community organizing, is to assist local groups and agencies in developing community fire plans. This article reports on a case study of community fire planning, the Seven Basins Neighborhood Fire Planning Project.

Background, Methods, and Goals

Jackson County, Oregon, is one of the state's most fire-prone areas, and the threat of wildfire is of paramount concern to most rural residents. We chose to focus our efforts on the Seven Basins watershed, a 250,000-acre area in Jackson County with significant fire risks but no active community fire planning. The Seven Basins had experienced more than 1,400 fires since 1970, including three over 5,000 acres in size. The watershed is characterized by a checkerboard ownership pattern, with alternating sections of federal and private land, making the need for coordination in addressing wildfire all the more essential.

Our approach was two pronged: bring key agency stakeholders together to better coordinate fuels reduction efforts and reach out to watershed residents at the neighborhood level, inviting them to participate in planning efforts that would directly benefit them. To begin the process, we convened a steering committee with representatives from the state forestry agency, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and the Seven Basins watershed council, a local citizens group. The three local fire districts were invited to participate but were unable to due to staffing limitations. Nevertheless, we solicited their input throughout the planning process. We secured a grant for a pilot project and hired a half-time FTE project coordinator.

The steering committee's goals were to:

- Educate rural homeowners in the watershed about fire safe practices;
- Improve wildfire preparedness and emergency communications within neighborhoods;
- Promote fuels reduction, and coordinate projects on a neighborhood level; and
- Improve interagency coordination.

In February 2003, we distributed a tabloid on wildfire-related topics to all watershed residents, informing them of the project and inviting them to participate in a one of three community meetings. Volunteers recruited at the community meetings, as well as directly from the tabloid, served as hosts for subsequent neighborhood fire planning meetings.

"Coffee-Table" Planning: Building a Community Fire Plan

Thus began an intensive round of neighborhood outreach. Neighborhood fire planning involves face-to-face interaction with residents--lots of it. From Spring 2003 through Spring 2005, 83 neighborhood meetings were held, mostly on weeknights in a host neighbor's living room. Twenty-one neighborhoods were involved in planning, representing nearly 400 residents owning more than 6,000 acres.

At each series of neighborhood meetings, the Project Coordinator helped residents identify values at risk and hazardous fuels concerns. Neighborhood phone trees were created to facilitate effective communication during a wildfire or other emergency. Residents inventoried wildfire-related equipment, skills, and resources such as water sources. Other wildfire-related issues were addressed and solutions found whenever possible. Examples are the evacuation of animals, concerns about the spread of wildfire from campfires on BLM waterfront property, and forgotten burn piles in a railroad right of way. Information about defensible space and fuels reduction cost share programs was presented, and signups taken. Generally, three to four meetings were held in each neighborhood.

In concert with neighborhood planning, we held more than a dozen workshops on fire-related topics, published four editions of the fire issues tabloid, and delivered two train-the-trainers session for fire plan volunteers. With neighborhood fire planning underway, the next task became to develop a community fire plan that brought together the individual neighborhood plans in a coordinated fashion. To facilitate this process, we conducted a risk assessment incorporating a variety of spatial data such as fire hazard, ignition risk, and locations of completed treatments, using GIS software (ArcMap). The risk assessment helped identify neighborhoods within the watershed where limited resources can be most effectively focused to reduce the threat of wildfire.

Program Outcomes and Implications for Extension Programming

One of the most gratifying benefits of the project has been to observe neighborhoods coming together around the common concern of wildfire. Not all neighborhood planning efforts were successful, but of the 21 neighborhoods we've worked with, 16 are still meeting, updating their phone and resource lists, and continuing with hazardous fuels reduction. We are assisting three neighborhoods in implementing large-scale fuelbreaks, involving multiple properties, to tie into fuels treatments on adjacent BLM parcels. More such projects are under development.

Another important project outcome has been improved interagency coordination. Through monthly steering committee meetings, hazardous fuels reduction in the watershed is increasingly coordinated between the BLM, the state forestry department, and other agencies, both to take advantage of strategic opportunities and to respond to community concerns.

For example, in direct response to neighborhood planning efforts, BLM has completed three hazardous fuels reduction Categorical Exclusions under the Healthy Forests Initiative authority, totaling more than 1,000 acres. Other examples include utilizing local Job Council crews to treat hazardous fuels on private access roads, and developing a pass-through agreement with a rural fire district to complete hazardous fuels treatments.

A further benefit in these times of limited resources is leveraging grant dollars. Efforts to secure National Fire Plan funds have been successful in the Seven Basins watershed, in contrast to other parts of the county without active fire planning projects.

Community fire planning, involving a variety of local stakeholders, is widely viewed as critical to improving preparedness for wildfire in the wildland-urban interface (National Fire Plan, 2005). Extension can play an important role in helping communities develop and implement community fire plans, using its natural strengths in facilitation, strong community networks, and ability to rapidly mobilize resources around an issue. However, community fire planning is very time-consuming. In our case, the ability to secure grant funds for a half-time project coordinator to complete much of the project implementation has been essential.

References

Creighton, J. H., Baumgartner, D. M., & Gibbs, S. D. (2002). Fire prevention in the rural/urban

interface: Washington's Backyard Forest Stewardship/Wildfire Safety Program. *Journal of Extension* [On-line]. 40(2). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2002April/iw5.html>

Monroe, M. C., Jacobson, S. K., & Bowers, A. (2003). Partnerships for natural resource education: Differing program needs and perspectives of Extension agents and state agency staff. *Journal of Extension* [On-line]. 41(3). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2003june/a3.shtml>

National Fire Plan. (2002). *A collaborative approach for reducing wildland fire risks to communities and the environment: 10-Year comprehensive strategy*. Available at: <http://www.fireplan.gov/reports/11-23-en.pdf>

Copyright by Extension Journal, Inc. ISSN 1077-5315. Articles appearing in the Journal become the property of the Journal. Single copies of articles may be reproduced in electronic or print form for use in educational or training activities. Inclusion of articles in other publications, electronic sources, or systematic large-scale distribution may be done only with prior electronic or written permission of the *Journal Editorial Office*, joe-ed@joe.org.

If you have difficulties viewing or printing this page, please contact [JOF Technical Support](#)