



## **Addressing the Threat of Wildfire in the Wildland-Urban Interface**

### **A Position Statement of the Washington State Society of American Foresters**

#### **Position:**

Each year more homes and structures are built near or within Washington's forest and range lands creating Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) zones. WUI zones increase the risks of catastrophic wildfire threatening life, property and infrastructure involving hundreds of communities across the State. Fighting wildfires within WUI zones is one of the most complicated, costly and dangerous situations that federal, state and local firefighters face. The Washington State Society of American Foresters (WSSAF) advocates:

1. Increased awareness, support and commitment from Federal, State and Local elected officials and agency leaders to address the growing wildfire risks to residents and firefighters within WUI zones.
2. Increased government and private investment in:
  - a. Teaching WUI homeowners a sense of accountability and responsibility to build maintain and defend their homes.
  - b. Recruiting and retaining structural and wildland fire fighters with the best equipment and training available.
  - c. Expanding efforts to prepare and implement Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPP) across the state.

#### **Issue:**

The development of new homes and recreational properties continues to expand into Washington's forest and range areas creating Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) zones. These very attractive wildland areas have a history of natural and repeated wildfire. Wildfires within WUI zones pose great challenges and risks to both structural and wildland firefighters. Firefighting tactics on wildland fires differ considerably from those in structure firefighting, as access to homes and availability of water are often limited in WUI zones, fuels are not confined and weather is a larger factor. Combining wildland fire fighting and structure protection during extreme wildfire conditions is costly and dangerous. Fire prevention and planning in WUI zones are extremely important. Homeowners must understand and accept responsibilities of wildfire risks in WUI zones by investing in proper building and maintenance.

#### **Background:**

Before settlement wildfire was part of the natural cycle of forests and grasslands in the State of Washington. However, to settlers, the threats of wildfire outweighed the benefits to maintaining natural ecosystems, and they created policies to control and suppress wildfire. A century of wildfire suppression, especially in Eastern Washington, has created dense fire-prone vegetative conditions in our public and private forests and grasslands turning wildfires into catastrophes. In the years since fire control began, natural resources researchers and managers, as well as citizens have gained a more comprehensive understanding of vegetative management and various roles of fire. This new understanding of the roles of fire has led to a shift in wildfire policy towards managing fire at the landscape level through the use of prescribed fire and forest thinning where appropriate to improve forest health and wildlife habitat.

There are two major complications in the State of Washington to this shift in wildfire policy from one of control and suppression to one of landscape management: (1) our state has vast areas of wildfire prone fuel and vegetation on public and private lands and (2) the growing number of Wildland-Urban Interface zones and structures.

A century of wildfire control and suppression has created overcrowded and dense stands of trees and vegetation that are prone to rapid wildfire spread during droughty conditions. In addition, there are vast areas of insect and disease killed forests, especially in Eastern Washington, creating contiguous fuel conditions for extreme wildland fire behavior. Intermixed within these wildfire prone forests and grasslands are an ever expanding number of homes and recreational properties in Wildland-Urban Interface zones or WUI. The protection of life and properties within WUI zones from wildfire are costly to taxpayers and dangerous to structural and wildland firefighters. A renewed commitment is needed to address the growing number of WUI zones through increased support of federal, state and local wildfire programs to avert catastrophic wildfire events. Addressing the wildfire threats in WUI zones, will require both public and private investment to require proper building and maintenance of homes, to recruit, train and equip fire fighters, and to prioritize and implement fuels reduction efforts.

**Homeowner Responsibility:**

Homeowners who live in the WUI zone need to use fire resistant materials, situating homes on lots so as to protect them from possible fire spread, clearing a perimeter of defensible space around their homes, reducing "ladder fuels" which help fires jump into tree tops, having their properties accessible, and financially supporting efforts for reliable water sources. In WUI zones, all homeowners need to participate and be accountable for investing in fire prevention and defense.

**Investment in Fire Fighting:**

Because of the complexity of fighting wildfires in the WUI zones, a corps of reliable and trained structural and wildland fire fighters is required. Increased public and private financial support is needed for Federal, state and local fire fighters to have necessary training and equipment to manage wildfire in WUI zones.

**Invest in Community Wildfire Protection Plans:**

Increased public and private financial support is necessary to continue the development and implementation of Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPP). CWPPs prioritize public safety needs in WUI zones through on the ground implementation of hazardous fuels reduction efforts involving forest thinning and pruning, construction of firebreaks and use of prescribed fire on private and public lands.

**References:**

Cohen, Jack D. 1999. "Reducing the Wild Fire Threat to Homes: Where and How Much?" USDA Forest Service Gen. Tech Rep. PSW-GTR-173.

Cohen, Jack D. 2000. "What is the Wildland Fire Threat to Homes?" Presented as the Thompson Memorial Lecture, April 10, 2000, School of Forestry, Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ. Pp.1-13.

Fitzgerald, Stephen A. 2004. "Improving Fire Resiliency of Pacific Northwest Forests." Western Forester, Volume 49 Number 3, May/June 2004. pp. 1-5.

Goodman, Linda. 2004. "The Future of Our Forests: A Good Time to Make a Difference." Western Forester, Volume 49 Number 3, May/June 2004. Pp.16-17.

Maranghides, Alexander and William Mell. 2009. "A Case Study of a Community Affected by the Witch and Guejito Fires". NIST Technical Note 1635, US Dept of Commerce Technology Administration, Gaithersburg, MD. Pp.1-84.

National Fire Protection Association, 2009. "Safer From the Start – A Guide to Firewise-Friendly Developments. Quincy, MA. PP. 1-6.

Society of American Foresters. 2008. "Wildland Fire Management – A Position of the Society of American Foresters." Bethesda, MD. June 7, 2008. PP. 1-10.

US Fire Administration. 2002. "Fires in the Wildland/Urban Interface". Topical Fire Research Series, Volume 2 Issue 16, March 2002.

Washington State Department of Natural Resources. 2006. "Strategic Plan for Wildland Fire Protection – Phase 1." Resource Protection Division, Olympia, WA. April 2006.

*This position statement was adopted by the Washington State SAF Executive Committee on July 23, 2009, and supported with 97.4 percent approval by member referendum in November 2009. This statement will expire July 23, 2014, unless after thorough review it is renewed by the Committee.*