

Southern
Interagency
Wildland-Urban
Interface Strategy

June 1

2010

**A five to ten year wildland-Urban
Interface Strategy for the South.**

Interagency Wildland-Urban Interface Fire Strategy Southern Area

June 1, 2010

Executive Summary

The South is one of the fastest growing regions in the nation. In 2007, the Census Bureau found that 65 of the 100 fastest growing counties in the nation are in the South. (Fire in the South 2, p.6) The Southern Wildfire Risk Assessment identified 118,083 communities at risk of wildfire damage and of those, 50,000 are considered at high to very high risk. (Fire in the South 2, p. 2)

In 2001, 42 wildfire specialists met to develop a strategy to address wildland-urban interface (WUI) issues in the South. Following seven years of implementing the strategy, during which time most of the recommendations were successfully achieved, the state foresters agreed in 2008 to review and update the strategy. A group of partners met in Birmingham December 2009 to chart a strategy for the next 5-10 years.

The goal of the new strategy is to plan, develop, and implement effective wildland-urban interface (WUI) fire programs in the Southern Area.

Objectives:

1. Provide program leadership.
2. Enhance internal and external communications.
3. Encourage homeowners and communities to adopt programs to protect people, property, and natural resources from the risk of wildland fire.
5. Monitor and evaluate program implementation to demonstrate the effectiveness of wildland-urban interface fire mitigation programs.

Priority Actions/Recommendations:

1. Determine the best method to provide leadership for the WUI fire program in the Southern Area. Identify leadership roles and responsibilities.
2. Develop and implement an internal communications strategy for the Southern Area.
3. Partner with InterfaceSouth to conduct a literature review, design and implement a research project to better understand social dimensions and population demographics, and evaluate the effectiveness of current messages and campaigns.
4. Encourage and where possible support local, county, and regional planning agencies; architects, engineers, and landscape architects; homebuilders and developers; and homeowners to collaboratively develop and implement hazard mitigation programs.
5. Develop a methodology to demonstrate the effectiveness of WUI programs following implementation.

Background

The South consistently has the highest number of wildfires each year of any region in the continental United States. In 2009, the South had 49 percent of all wildfires reported in the nation and 49 percent of all reported acres burned. In 2008, the South had 55 percent of all wildfires reported in the nation and 42 percent of all acres burned. (National Interagency Fire Center)

The Southern Wildfire Risk Assessment (SWRA) identified one hundred million acres with moderate to extreme wildfire occurrence each year. In the South, an average of 68,000 wildfires burn approximately 938,000 acres each year. More than 88 million acres are classified as wildland-urban interface (WUI) where communities and homes are next to or within fire prone natural areas. (Fire in the South 2, p. 2)

Each state forestry agency can count significant wildfire acreage losses to forests, grasslands, and structures over the past 10 – 15 years. Trends seem to be escalating rather than slowing.

The 2001 strategy embraced the national Firewise program. The program targeted the homeowner, the community, and the wildland firefighter. Success was achieved with the Southern Area leading the nation with 215 Firewise Communities, USA. (www.firewise.org)

Following seven years of implementing the strategy, during which most of the recommendations were successfully achieved, the state foresters agreed in 2008 to review and update the strategy.

2009 Southern Area Strategy Workshop

A group of partners met in Birmingham December 4 through December 6, 2009 to chart a strategy for the next 5 – 10 years. Attendees included representatives of the thirteen southern state foresters; the USDA Forest Service Southern Region and Southern Research Station; USDI National Park Service Southeast Region, Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Fish and Wildlife Service; and the Student Conservation Association. The Nature Conservancy and Tall Timbers Research Station were unable to attend yet both want to participate. The collaborative effort produced a stated goal and a strategy consisting of five objectives.

Goal

Plan, develop, and implement effective wildland-urban interface (WUI) fire programs in the Southern Area.

The new goal celebrates the success of southern wildland-urban interface programs the past nine years and prepares the program to proactively — as opposed to reactively — meet public needs in the coming decade. The recommended strategy for accomplishing the goal is supported by the following resources:

- Southern Group of State Foresters Strategic Plan
- The Southern Wildfire Risk Assessment
- Fire in the South 2
- Forest Resource Assessment and Action Plan for each state
- The “One Message Many Voices” prescribed fire campaign
- National Association of State Foresters process for preparing Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs)
- Southern Fire Exchange Consortium
- National Wildfire Coordinating Group WUI Mitigation Committee

- USDA Forest Service – Southern Region’s Strategic Framework
- Draft Cohesive Wildfire Management Strategy

Objectives

1. Provide program leadership

Proposed Action:

This is the highest priority objective and must be accomplished before implementing other objectives.

Provide program leadership to facilitate inclusion and cooperation among federal, state, and local agencies and private sector organizations to plan, develop, implement, and evaluate effective WUI programs in the Southern Area. Program leadership is critical to sustain model wildland-urban interface programs at the state, regional, and national level.

Specific Action:

Action 1: Establish a leadership structure.

- a. Program leadership is needed. Leadership can be provided by the Forest Service, states or an interagency group similar to the Southern Wildland-Urban Interface Council. The group may be a council, a steering committee, a cooperative committee, an advisory committee, a WUI “MAC” group, or other entity.
- b. Membership in an interagency group may include:
 - Traditional partners such as the state foresters, the Southern Group of State Foresters Southern Wildland-Urban interface Council; USDA Forest Service Southern Region and Southern Research Station InterfaceSouth; the USDI National Park Service Southeast Region, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Fish and Wildlife Service; and Homeland Security.
 - Agencies such as regional, county, and local planning commissions, the State Insurance Board, the State Fire Marshal, state and local emergency management agencies, local fire departments, and the Cooperative Extension Service.
 - Organizations such as The Nature Conservancy, The Student Conservation Corps, Tall Timbers Research Station, the International Association of Fire Chiefs, League of Cities, home builder associations, land trust organizations, Urban Forest Council, National Association of Counties, state firefighter associations, master gardeners, state forestry associations, and the Red Cross.
 - Stakeholders such as homeowners and homeowner associations, home inspectors, realtors, bankers, design professionals, insurance agents, developers, contractors, and the media.

Priority Action for this Objective:

Determine the best method to provide leadership for implementing the wildland-urban interface fire program in the Southern Area. Identify leadership roles and responsibilities.

2. Enhance internal communications

Proposed Action:

Enhance internal (inter and intra-agency) communications to develop opportunities to broaden the knowledge and skills of field practitioners.

Specific Actions:

Action 1: Establish a taskforce to develop and implement an interagency communications strategy for internal organizational personnel. Each respective organization will have to establish a team to deliver the messages to their internal personnel.

Action 2: Conduct a needs assessment to establish needed WUI knowledge and skill development.

Action 3: Develop opportunities to expand the knowledge and skills of field personnel to work efficiently and effectively.

- a. Attend forums (webinars, exchanges and workshops) to broaden knowledge of the human dimensions of wildfire. Examples include a Changing Roles workshop and the Human Dimensions of Wildland Fire conference.
- b. Utilize the *Communicator's Guide for Wildland Fire Management: Fire Education, Prevention, and Mitigation* as a resource for field personnel and agency public information managers — Section 9- Fire Mitigation — specifically addresses WUI issues.
- c. Utilize Changing Roles —Module 4 — which focuses on communication.

Action 4: Representatives of respective organizations should actively participate in the Southern Wildland-Urban Interface Council, the Southern Fire Exchange Consortium (SFE) and the National Wildfire Coordinating Group WUI Mitigation Committee.

- a. Elevate and maintain active Forest Service fire management membership on the Council.
- b. Expand technology transfer from InterfaceSouth, NWCG, and SFE to field practitioners by distributing newsletters, publications, and hosting webinars.
- c. Sponsor webinars with leading research scientists on subjects such as prescribed fire, social science, marketing, program accountability, etc.
- d. Sponsor webinars highlighting national and southern case studies of effective community mitigation programs.

Action 5: *Use web-based technology to share ideas and information.*

- a. Use Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center- My Community www.wildfirelessons.net.
- b. Use “chat rooms” if available to agency personnel.

Action 6: *Partner with InterfaceSouth to develop web-based continuing education WUI programs for agency personnel.*

- a. Provide learning opportunities for gaining knowledge and improving skills for working in the WUI.
- b. Include the latest research and practitioner findings.

Priority Action for this Objective:

Develop and implement an internal communications strategy for the Southern Area.

3. Enhance external communications

Proposed Action:

Based on an interagency communications strategy develop messages, products, campaigns, and a delivery system for providing information to external stakeholders to make communities safer from wildfire.

Specific Actions:

Action 1: *Foster multi-agency collaboration related to WUI fire issues.*

Action 2: *Explore and understand new perspectives on WUI issues by reviewing and integrating research. For example, attend a Changing Roles workshop, an Emerging Issues Along Urban/Rural Interfaces conference, participate in a SWUIC webinar and or read case studies of successful community WUI programs.*

Action 3: *Assess the effectiveness of current WUI messages and programs to changing demographics.*

- a. Partner with InterfaceSouth to support a research study in a variety of southern geographic settings to better understand the changing dynamics of southern demographics in relation to the effectiveness of current messages and WUI programs.
- b. Investigate the migration of people to the South - who are they, from where did they come, and what is their understanding of WUI messages and programs.
- c. Investigate the values of long-term residents regarding the effectiveness of WUI messages and programs.
- d. Compare the values of new residents to the values of long-term residents to understand potential conflict with WUI messages and programs and the need for multiple messages.

Action 4: Develop effective WUI programs that address changing demographics and changing perceptions, values, and attitudes in the Southern Area.

- a. Use the latest academic and fire management research to improve WUI awareness and effectiveness. Examples of applicable social science research include works by Pamela Jakes, Sarah McCaffrey, Victoria Sturtevant, Martha Monroe, Cassandra Johnson, Michael Bowker, The Nature Conservancy, and the “One Message Many Voices” prescribed fire campaign.
- b. Identify stakeholders and invite their participation. Target urban newcomers moving to traditionally rural communities.
- c. Work with partners, such as federal and state agencies, community fire departments, and organizations such as The Nature Conservancy and the International Association of Fire Chiefs.
- d. Design messages and develop programs to mitigate specific WUI issues based upon the demographic data for a targeted community.
- e. Pursue a more active relationship between state Firewise liaisons and the NFPA Firewise leadership and staff.
- f. Develop and highlight southern case studies to determine effectiveness of existing WUI programs to model new programs and products.
- g. Collaborate with InterfaceSouth to utilize an existing website or develop a new site to post WUI information and products.
- h. Partner with InterfaceSouth to investigate the opportunity to develop a WUI educational packet for homeowners and neighborhoods by possibly using Module 1 of Changing Roles and the DVD.
- i. Propose and develop products that can be easily shared and replicated by others and customized easily for state- and local-specific needs.
- j. Develop a distribution plan for all products developed.

Action 5: Leadership and members should serve as a professional resource to universities, local and regional planning commissions, and governing bodies.

- a. Work with the Changing Roles program to develop WUI accredited program curricula for state fire training academies, university students, and continuing education credits for professionals. Target planners, landscape architects, and engineering curricula.
- b. Prepare an instructor guide and power point presentation for an agency speaker bureau promoting the WUI message for community meetings, fire training academies; and general presentations to universities, conferences, symposiums, and professional association and trade meetings.
- c. Provide technical assistance to planning commissions, community governing bodies, and homeowners to plan and implement WUI mitigation programs.

Action 6: Institute a campaign extolling the benefits of prescribed fire as one useful tool to reduce the intensity and therefore the impact of wildfire on communities.

- a. Provide information and technical assistance to communities and homeowners on the benefits, methods, and implementation of a fuel management program.
- b. Provide a message on the benefits of managed forests in relation to protecting communities from wildfire.

- c. Support the “One Message Many Voices” project.

Action 7: *Utilize a calendar of key WUI conferences, events, and professional association meetings on the InterfaceSouth website.*

Priority Action for this Objective:

Partner with InterfaceSouth to conduct a literature review, design and conduct a research project to better understand social dimensions and population demographics and evaluate the effectiveness of current messages and campaigns.

4. Encourage homeowners and communities to adopt programs to protect people, property, and natural resources from the risk of wildland fire

Proposed Action:

Work with homeowners to adopt programs for protecting communities from wildfire.

- Educate and raise awareness of the wildland fire hazards and the simple steps that can be taken to prevent the risk.
- Encourage implementation of Firewise home protection zone standards
- Provide mitigation maintenance guidance to achieve sustainable, fire-adapted communities
- Educate and institute where possible the Ready-Set-Go program
- Implement the National Association of State Foresters program for identifying communities at risk
- Collaboratively encourage development and implementation of Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPP).
- Encourage and support prioritization of mitigation funds and projects where Firewise and CWPPs have been developed and implemented.
- Educate and raise awareness of the wildland fire hazards and the simple steps that can be taken to reduce risk.

Specific Actions:

Action 1: *Work with local, county, and regional planning agencies; architects, engineers, and landscape architects; homebuilders and developers to collaboratively develop and encourage standards to mitigate wildfire hazards.*

- a. Provide awareness and technical expertise to planning agencies to develop mitigation plans to proactively protect homes and communities from wildfire.
- b. Use the SWRA data base to support regional planning commissions:
 - When identifying areas of high wildfire risk.
 - When developing long-range regional land use plans which include mitigation of wildfire hazards.
- c. Provide technical information and support to achieve sustainable fire-adapted communities.

- d. Provide talking points for use with land developers and homebuilders regarding home protection zones and sustainable fire-adapted communities.

Action 2: Strengthen the role of partners and stakeholders.

- a. Build collaborative programs.
- b. Encourage state and regional steering councils and local community, neighborhood, and homeowner association advisory committees to address WUI issues by planning, developing, and implementing regional, state, and local mitigation programs.
- c. Develop unified messages using Changing Roles and other resources linking WUI fire issues with other WUI issues such as soil, water, and air quality; biodiversity; forest sustainability; invasive species; and wildlife habitat management.
- d. Build capacity by engaging fire service organizations at the state and regional level and providing support to local fire departments for prevention and suppression in the WUI with training, equipment, and funding.

Action 3: Empower homeowners to develop and implement programs which lower wildfire risk thereby reducing property losses.

- a. Better utilize the national Firewise Communities USA program as a template to deliver programs to homeowners and neighborhoods.
- b. Adapt the Firewise program to the geographic and social conditions of the local community.
- c. Provide information on the International Association of Fire Chief's Ready-Set-Go program.
- d. Engage stakeholders to define and identify shared values and outcomes relating to WUI issues using the collaborative principles taught in P-301, Fire Prevention Education 2.
- e. Establish local committees to prepare Community Wildfire Protection Plans using the P-301, Fire Prevention Education 2 methodology.
- f. Provide a standard package derived from the SWRA consisting of maps, templates, and fire history data to assist with the development of CWPPs.
- g. Identify funding resources to develop CWPPs and implement hazard fuel reduction projects to achieve sustainable fire-adapted communities.
- h. Develop an internal Southern Area WUI award similar to the Browning Award to recognize distinguishable programs.
- i. Fully utilize state and national Firewise leadership awards.

Priority Action Needed for this Objective:

Support local, county, and regional planning agencies; architects, engineers, and landscape architects; homebuilders and developers; and homeowners to collaboratively develop and implement hazard mitigation programs.

5. Monitor and evaluate program implementation to demonstrate the effectiveness of wildland-urban interface wildfire mitigation programs

Proposed Action:

Monitor and evaluate program implementation to demonstrate the effectiveness of WUI mitigation programs. Program managers know how a WUI program works, but not necessarily if it is really working. In WUI programs, “widgets” are counted such as acres treated but not whether those acres treated make a long-term difference to community well-being. A taskforce will develop a process to measure the effectiveness of this strategy and program success at the local, state, and regional level.

Specific Actions:

Action 1: Develop a methodology for measuring program effectiveness. Develop baseline data consistent across the Southern Area using information from the Southern Wildfire Risk Assessment and economic analysis using the resources of the Southern Research Station.

- a. Appoint a task force to develop a monitoring plan.
- b. Develop consensus concerning replicable and reliable metrics.
- c. Develop a common template that states can use to consistently measure the effectiveness of WUI programs.

Action 2: Using the methodology developed above, annually evaluate the progress of implementing programs across the south. Post program successes on the WUI website.

- a. Measure effectiveness based on programs making a long-term difference to the safety of homeowners and communities.

Action 3: Monitor the implementation of the 2010 WUI Strategy.

- a. The taskforce may make annual strategic adjustments to the strategy.

Priority Action Needed for this Objective:

Develop a methodology to demonstrate the effectiveness of WUI programs following implementation.