

# Can the Applegate be a “Fire-Adapted” Community?

BY SANDY SHAFFER

The U.S. Western Governors Association (WGA) has a federal advisory committee that focuses on forest health issues (FHAC). I've been a member of this committee since 2003; it's currently comprised of about 65 people representing 16 western states. The experience of working on a nation-wide committee and the exposure to national-level natural resource planning have been eye-opening, to say the least. My voice, as a community fire-plan coordinator and as a private landowner, has been heard at the Washington D.C. level, and what a feeling that is. Over the years I've offered opinions and gleaned information to bring back to my community, so that we in southwest Oregon can try to stay on top of wildfire issues. This fall something new on the FHAC's agenda caught my attention.

You may recall that last year I wrote in the *Applegater* about talk of shifting roles and responsibilities in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI), with increased private landowner responsibility a probable outcome. Well, there is a name to this federal concept and it's called “fire-adapted human communities.” My first reaction was, “Whoa!”

Details on this concept are found in the 2009 Quadrennial Fire Review (QFR), a report written by the five federal land managing departments (Forest Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service and Fish and Wildlife Service) and the National Association of State Foresters. The QFR discusses the past decade of wildland fire, forces seen as driving the future, and strategies for the next decade. It's pretty dry reading until you get to the “fire-adapted communities” part, so I'll just give you some of the high points.

After a review of the first QFR in 2005, five main driving forces were identified in the 2009 version:

- The effects of climate change will continue to result in greater probability of longer and bigger fire seasons, in more regions in the nation.
- Cumulative drought effects will further stress fuels accumulations.

- There will be continued wildfire risk in the Wildland Urban Interface despite greater public awareness and broader involvement of communities.
- Emergency response demands will escalate.
- Fire agency budget resources – federal, tribal, state or local – will be strained by increased demands and rising costs during a period where government budget revenues will be very tight or falling

I can understand all of these points, since we are, as of the end of November, still in a “moderate drought” in SW Oregon; and, recently I've seen some of our big ponderosa pine dying off. I found the fourth point interesting; because of the extreme climatic changes being felt throughout the world, there are more natural disasters (floods, tsunamis, storms), and, there is also the potential for “major events” where FEMA and other emergency responder efforts (including fire management) could be required. Indeed, our local fire district and federal agency fire folks have assisted in Katrina, the World Trade Center disaster, the Columbia space disaster, and Australian bushfires.

A key observation in the QFR was that the effects of climate change on our forests are producing regional fire seasons that are sporadic and unpredictable in both severity and duration. This makes it harder to plan and budget for what the feds are calling “asymmetric” or irregular fire across the country. Who will need what degree of fire protection when, and for how long? This has produced a new strategy for fighting wildfire – “Strategic Management Response” (SMR) – to replace “Appropriate Management Response.” (Don't you just love the terms they come up with?)

Across the nation, fire seasons are lengthening, with an average of eight to ten million acres burning from wildfires each year. Federal fuels treatments, however, are averaging only half of that number, at four million acres treated per year. Add in the perpetual growth of biomass in our forests and we are falling further and further behind.

Several issues regarding WUI communities (and our private properties) are contributing to this big equation. Most noteworthy is that housing and population growth rates in the WUI are nearly triple the rates of increase seen outside of the WUI. Most of this growth is in the “intermix” (another new word), which is defined as where there are more trees and fewer homes, but they are more “likely to be outside of fire district and community jurisdiction boundaries.” The fact that many large timber holdings are being sold for development only adds to this equation. So, no surprise that studies by the Government Accountability Office have shown that “rising fire suppression costs are driven primarily by suppression efforts tied to protecting private property.”

The solution? Promote “fire-adapted human communities” rather than escalating protection of communities at risk in the WUI, as was suggested in the 2000 National Fire Plan. Because, as the QFR states, “As some ecosystems must adapt to a fire-prone environment in order to survive, so must human communities in

One of the specifics of how the QFR suggests we become “fire-adapted” includes creating *community* defensible space and fuel reduction zones for the WUI; going beyond individual home defensible spaces to larger treated areas that would protect the infrastructure of the community in the event of a wildfire. (*We know defensible space can work – read Tim Gonzales' article “National Fire Plan Grant success stories and how you can help” on page 22.*) Something I like is the idea of prioritizing funding of fuel reduction projects around “proactive communities” (those with a CWPP or a Firewise or Fire Safe designation). Help the communities that are helping themselves – yes, yes, yes!

Another element of becoming a fire-adapted community is having a wider range of alternatives around evacuation policies. By enabling the “Leave Early or Stay and Defend” concept that was first developed in Australia, private WUI landowners take responsibility for their choices: the choice to make their home more fire resilient, the choice to ignore the issue and evacuate ASAP, the choice to prepare and defend their home safely. And, there would be the possibility of more options for wildfire managers. Firefighters could potentially use point protection tactics (defending single homes here and there) rather than trying to protect the whole perimeter of the fire. Save the homes

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the interface, if they are to survive over the long-term.” Hmmmm...

But first the fire governance has to be “re-affirmed” to clarify and *realign* “existing federal, state and local roles, responsibilities and authorities for protecting the WUI.” A facet of SMR would also reshape national emergency response within fire leadership, to help address the increase in natural disaster situations. So, by giving fire suppression responsibility to the “party best suited to that area,” the feds could focus on the wildland, while state and local agencies covered more populated areas. Might make sense on paper, but what about a fire on federal land in a populated area, and what about our struggling state and local budgets? Given the current financial situation, I'm not quite sure how this realignment might come about, but one option in the QFR was stewardship contracts for fuels reduction in the WUI. Hmmmm...interesting.

The QFR says this is all about changing the public's expectation that “government will always be there” during a wildfire event, and about encouraging communities and property owners to “take responsibility and become active participants” in the wildfire equation. A starting point, says the QFR, would be to link community wildfire protection plans (CWPPs such as our Applegate Fire Plan) to federal fire management plans, including a joint community wildfire response plan.

instead of the forest, and save money? I think that's what I'm understanding, but given the enormity of the wildfire problem and how little we've accomplished in the past decade, I'm not sure there are other alternatives. What do you think?

The underlying strategy for achieving fire-adapted communities is to be able to include them as a component within the new Strategic Management Response to wildfire in the future. By developing “understandable and demonstrable metrics” (beyond a simple checklist of items such as fuels treatment programs, defensible space work, ingress/egress, and local building codes or ordinances) of what “fire-adapted” means, an evaluation of the return on investments of those efforts to address fire risk in the WUI can be realized. The QFR suggests that only by successfully “extending the base,” having local government, communities and residents as full partners in the wildfire scenario, can we address “the threats and risks of the escalating wildfire challenge.”

I totally agree with this inclusive philosophy, but how to get there is the billion-dollar question. It will be interesting to see how these SMR and “fire-adapted” concepts are developed.

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*REFERENCE NOTE: Items in quotes above are all from the 2009 Quadrennial Fire Review.*



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