



Transcript
Firewise Communities Chat Session
April 16, 2008

Judith_Leraas_Cook Welcome to today's Firewise chat session. And thank you for joining us. Today's chat will feature information about one of our newest Firewise Communities/USA sites. Big Bear Lake, California, the community and the fire department worked together to improve wildfire safety there. My name is Judith Leraas Cook and I am project manager for Firewise Communities/USA. Michele Steinberg, support manager for the Firewise program, and I will moderate today's session. Welcome, Michele!

Michele_Steinberg Thanks, Judith. I'm pleased to be here, and looking forward to David's comments.

Judith_Leraas_Cook Thanks, Michele. We are delighted to have David Yegge as our chat guest today. David is a Fuel Technician with the Big Bear Lake, California Fire Department. Big Bear Lake has just earned Firewise Communities/USA status, thanks to his efforts. Please hold your questions until the end of the presentation. The chat will then become completely interactive and we encourage you to join in at that time. David, can you tell us more about Big Bear Lake? Where in California is it, and how many people live there? What is its experience with wildfire?

David_Yegge First, thank you for having me. It is an honor to be able to share with people what we are accomplishing here in Big Bear Lake. The City of Big Bear Lake is nestled in the middle of the San Bernardino National Forest. Its elevation is 6800 feet. It is approximately 100 miles due East of the City of Los Angeles. We have a permanent population of 6,200 people. It swells 20,000 to 50,000 people on weekends and holidays. We live in a fire adapted ecosystem. Historically it is a Fire Regime I. It is a mixed conifer and hardwood forest. In 2003, the communities within Big Bear Valley were forced to evacuate due to the dangerous threat of the "Old Fire". In the summers of 2006, 2007 the list of fires grew to include the Heart-Mallard Fire, Sawtooth Fire, Butler I and the Butler II Fire, Slide Fire and the Grass Valley Fire. Virtually these wildfires have occurred all around us but not in the basin of the Big Bear Valley. As a result of the "Old Fire" in 2003, various community leaders came together to discuss what should be done to protect the community from a wildfire. They realized that if a wildfire were to occur within the basin it could have long term economic consequences to the viability of this community.

Judith_Leraas_Cook How did residents come to be involved in wildfire mitigation efforts?

David_Yegge Ultimately it was through the completion of the Big Bear Valley Wildfire Protection Plan CWPP. Prior to the development of this plan the focus was helter skelter. People were doing a lot of “things” but in all different directions with varying degrees of success. The CWPP gave clear directions and established a road map for the future. The CWPP can be downloaded at our website www.thisisin.org. Our two main goals for the next several years are fuel reduction and replacement of old shake shingle roofs. We believed early on that people truly wanted to create defensible space but they needed help in overcoming the high costs of conducting heavy fuel reduction. Please realize these are properties that have never conducted fuel reduction except for removing pine needles, grasses and weeds. A curbside chipping program was born. Providing curbside chipping eliminates the problematic issues of hauling and disposing of the vegetation. Furthermore, it reduces the cost of conducting fuel reduction by 35 to 50%. We have found that landscapes, defensible space contractor, etc. prefer this approach, because they don't have to worry about hauling and disposing of the vegetation at the landfill. It makes an unmanageable issue manageable. Additionally, property owners needed to be educated on “what to do” and “how to do it” so we embarked on a mass media campaign i.e., TV infomercials, radio, news papers, direct mailers all focused on promoting fuel reduction on properties. We wrote grants to help fund our curbside chipping program. Our city council assisted by funding the purchase of two chippers and one chipper truck. We then sent mailers to neighborhoods asking them to voluntarily bring their vegetation and thinned out smaller trees to the curb. This has had a positive impact. Last summer, we had over 1300 property owners participate. We collected 1015 tons of branches limbs and small dense trees. We conducted numerous property visits which allowed us the opportunity to educate people on “why” fuel reduction is necessary. As a certified arborists, I find most generally, people want to know “what” they can do to create defensible space and improve the survivability and health of their trees a

Judith_Leraas_Cook What kinds of benefits did residents see when they started doing some trimming and cleaning up of their properties?

David_Yegge First, our hazard abatement notices are sent to every property owner in a neighborhood. The first benefit that residents receive is the comfort of knowing that the whole neighborhood is involved not just selected few. There is a sense of peer pressure. I firmly believe in the need to conduct fuel reduction beyond a single property line. To achieve even a 100-foot fuel modification around a home it frequently over laps in neighboring homes and properties. When a whole neighborhood has accomplished forest fuels reduction a positive community spirit is developed. It is evident that each property owner feels safer in the end. Another benefit that the property owner receives is an education on “how” to create defensible space around their home. They also learn “how” to create a healthier more fire resistant forested landscape.

Judith_Leraas_Cook It's evident that the City Fire Department played a strong role in working with residents. What kind of support and advice did you provide to people wanting to improve their homes' ignition resistance?

David_Yegge We believe we have some of the strongest building codes for new construction. For instance, we have required Class A roofing material on homes since 1981. Yet we have 300 to 500 homes with old untreated shake shingle roofs. Our

building code requires a one-hour minimum exterior siding. Enhanced construction of exterior decks i.e., solid composite decking, increased thickness of support beam and braces, boxed in eaves with approved fire proofing material, the elimination of various roof venting, enhanced vinyl siding and rain gutters, Enhanced vinyl window frames with dual pane glass. In spite of this, homes are still vulnerable until the horizontal and vertical break up of the vegetation structure is achieved. As a result, our focus is on providing education and economic incentives i.e., Neighborhood chipping program, to help support property owners in thinning out and limb up their vegetation and remove smaller dense groups of trees. That is why we developed the website thinisin.org. It provides our people with the resources they need to accomplish the task. Over the summer months of 2007 we received over 85,000 hits on thinisin.org. Additionally, we support this through mass media campaigns i.e., TV infomercials, radio, news papers, direct mailers all focused on promoting fuel reduction on properties. It is teaching property owners about “what to do” and “how to do it”. For several years we have conducted a forest fuels reduction preconstruction inspection for property owners building new homes or adjusting lot lines. We flag trees and shrubs, (outside of the foot print of the new home) that need to be removed. Our hazard abatement notices require property owners to thin out trees, remove dead material, and to limb up trees and shrubs to provide a vertical and horizontal separation of the vegetation. We support this with free educational property evaluations to help explain and identify what is exactly needed to be in compliance current defensible space standards. This year, because of the changes in the laws, we will be holding a meeting with landscapers and weed abatement contractors to educate them on what is required to be in compliance with the new requirements.

Judith_Leraas_Cook David, you corresponded with our program staff about the benefits of becoming a recognized Firewise Communities/USA site. Would you share a few of the key points with our audience?

David_Yegge Sure. When a community receives a National designation it is an indication that they are doing something right. Receiving this distinction positively reinforces decisions made by the City Council and Fire Board, to fund and implement the Healthy Urban Forest Program and Community Wildfire Defense. The budget for our Healthy Urban Forest Initiative and Community Wildfire Defense Program began in 2005 with around \$53,000. The 2007/2008 budget is over \$576,000. Next years budget will most likely be similar or higher. The City of Big Bear Lake is a tourist/recreation community. We are dependent upon tourism. The Firewise designation provides a positive psychological image of a community that is facing the fact the one day we will be impacted from a fire. Yet as a result, we are more fire aware having implemented programs that will make us less vulnerable to the effects of a wildfire and increased safety. If tourists feel more comfortable or safer, then they're less apprehensive to recreate in the City of Big Bear Lake. I also believe that by receiving the Firewise\USA Communities designation, it may help us in receiving future grant funding. It certainly can not hurt. Since we just received \$371,800 in US Forest Service State Fire Assistance grants, I would say it helped. Lastly, we want to encourage other organizations to tackle the Wildfire issues in their community

Judith_Leraas_Cook I understand that Big Baer Lake has embarked on a 'shake roof patrol' of sorts, with rules to back up the removal of shake roofs in your city by 2012. How is that program designed? Has it begun yet?

David_Yegge The City of Big Bear Lake has not allowed shake shingle roofs since 1981 in new construction. It requires a minimum of a Class A roof covering. As part of my research when I wrote the Big Bear Valley Community Wildfire Protection Plan in 2005, I read an article in the Journal of Forestry entitled "Preventing Disaster" by Jack Cohen. It provided compelling evidence on Home Ignitability. It is the same study that the FireWise\USA Community organization uses in its course "Assessing Wildfire Hazards in the Home Ignition Zone". Especially the part that he quotes Howard and et al on a study that survivability for homes can be enhanced up to 86% with the elimination of Shake shingle roofs and clearance of vegetation of 10 meters. That encouraged me to write a section in the Big Bear Valley Community Wildfire Protection Plan on the need to pass a "future effect" ordinance that would mandate the replacement of old shake shingles by some future date. In the summer of 2007 Our City Council took a bold action and passed an ordinance that mandates the replacement of shake roofs by the year 2012. They became one of the Leaders in the state to take this type of action. Incidentally, the Draft Blue Ribbon Commission Report on the Tahoe 2007 Angora Fire, was recently published. It identifies the need to mandate the replacement of shake shingle as well. Jack Cohen's article "Preventing Disaster" was also the impetus in writing a Pre Disaster Mitigation Grant in 2005 to financially assist property owners with replacing shake shingle roofs within 1500 feet of the National Forest. It is a one million dollar grant value. We are now beginning the implementation phase of this grant. Oh, yes, there is a catch! In order to qualify the property owner must meet strict defensible space standards. I'll keep you posted on its successes.

Judith_Leraas_Cook What are some other long-term goals for the Firewise Community of Big Bear Lake?

David_Yegge For the next several years we will be working on encouraging, prodding and nudging property owners to conduct fuel reduction. Secondly, we will be busy replacing shake shingle roofs. Our water purveyor will be busy upgrading the water distribution system. We will be looking strongly at long term exterior application of intumescent paints and finishes. A big issue is to encourage, the Federal government to fund the treatment of the San Bernardino National Forest within a mile and a half of the City of Big Bear Lake's boundaries. We also just passed a new brush and shrub reduction ordinance. It is a complex ordinance. It is an ordinance that has taken a year to pass. One key element identifies the need to remove pyrophytic juniper bushes within the home ignition zone, and or near decking. All of these projects are necessary to help reduce the impact that a wildfire can have on home ignitions. This meets with our overall goal of reducing the wildfire impact to structures and forested landscapes. It is a start, we have a long ways to go. Other goals established can be found within the Big Bear Valley Community Wildfire Protection Plan which can be downloaded at www.thisin.org.

Judith_Leraas_Cook Thank you, David! That was wonderful information. We will post the transcript of today's session in the 'chat archives' within the Firewise Forum within the next few days. The chat is now open to everyone.

Mike_Frost David: Are the city codes you spoke of available on line some where?

David_Yegge Yes. Go to thisin.org The tab under home survival tips has the building codes.

Mike_Frost Thanks. Also, have insurance companies played any part in encouraging your efforts?

Jeff_Madden The contractors you mention on your web site, are they "Firewise" certified or trained? And if yes, how did you come up with the certification?

David_Yegge We are seeing more and more that they are. They do charge 20% more for homes with shake shingle roofs.

Julie_Rogers David, you are doing a tremendous job! I am impressed, and motivated, and you've given me some good ideas. Question: how long has the roadside chipper program been in progress, and about what percent of homes are participating by now?

David_Yegge No. Many of them hold a Class A or B logging lic. They have been involved with conducting defensible space, fuel reduction for years. They are knowledgeable with our codes.

Mike_Frost David, does your CWPP include any "firefighter safety zones"? We just completed one in our community here in Whitefish and it really helped solidify our over-all plan.

David_Yegge It is a long story. I just told be Fire Chief, If we are going to be successful in conducting and removing large volumes of fuel we need to take it to the people. Make it easy for the people to conduct the work. Three years ago we started. We have had about 20% of the people involved.

Jeff_Madden More chipper questions (great presentation, BTW). WHO actually operates the equipment - the city/fire dept? Do you ever loan the equip out to other communities?

David_Yegge Well Now. We do have another document for that that is top secret.

David_Yegge Chipper question. For the first two years it was the Fire Chief and I. That is how important it was to us. Because of the volume last year our public works crews took it over.

David_Yegge concerning the Fire fighter safety zones. What we are creating is a shaded fuel brake so our firefighters can feel safe working around the homes.

Julie_Rogers David, are the public works crews paid by city budget funds, or do you have to raise the money to pay them?

Mike_Frost Thanks David. Great presentation and congratulations on your excellent "firewise" efforts in Big Bear.

David_Yegge We have federal funding to assist us. 75/25 split. WE just received additional funding of \$289,000. for the next two years.

Judith_Leraas_Cook David - This has been absolutely great information. We are so pleased that you were able to share it. It will be a great addition to the chat archives.

David_Yegge Our shrub reduction law that was just passed two nights ago will be on thisin.org in a couple of weeks.

Julie_Rogers Yes, David, sounds like you are a real powerhouse -- Big Bear Lake residents are very fortunate to have you working for and with them!

David_Yegge Thank you. After I retired as a Division Chief in a neighboring community, I was asked to come up here and write their Community Wildfire Protection Plan. That got me excited again.

Julie_Rogers David, if you have the time, I'm curious to know how your Firewise Communities effort and any local Fire Safe Council work together. Are you involved in both?

David_Yegge We work close with the Fire Safe Council to coordinate large multijurisdictional events other areas we just work on our own.

Julie_Rogers Thank you. It's great to see a former Chief becoming so passionate about the prevention side of wildfire!

Judith_Leraas_Cook Indeed! Research says mitigation makes a huge difference.

David_Yegge My other title was Fire Marshal. I have had years of experience with Fire Prevention.

Mike_Frost David, are you doing any work with individuals within the community on emergency communications and evacuation protocols?

David_Yegge Yes, We just implemented a siren warning system. Valley wide.

Mike_Frost We're trying to develop an inexpensive but reliable communications system. Any suggestions?

David_Yegge We have reverse 911 as well.

Mike_Frost Cool. That's what we need.

David_Yegge The siren warning system sounds every month as a test. It is designed to notify people that might be outside working or playing. then the people are directed to tune into the local radio station.

David_Yegge Evacuation routes? Let me just say this, after the "old fire" a system was developed with the Sheriffs department that is one of the best systems that I have seen. It is to complex to explain online.

Judith_Leraas_Cook David - We want to thank you again for your grand presentation. For those of you who will be leaving us at the top of the hour, thank you for joining us!

David_Yegge Your welcome, anything else?

Julie_Rogers David, keep up the great work! Your story is very inspiring.

Mike_Frost I understand. This gets to be pretty complicated. We use the Sheriff's office here too. Is there anything in more detail about this on your web site?

David_Yegge thank you.

Judith_Leraas_Cook If you have questions that you would like answered later, you can contact me at firewiseusa@aol.com and I will put you into contact with someone who can help you.

Mike_Frost Thanks David and Judith. Great job! Talk with ya later.

David_Yegge Mike, there is a little. For homeland security reasons we have chosen not to say much.

Michele_Steinberg This was a great discussion. Thank you, David, and all of you who joined us today.

Judith_Leraas_Cook David - I visited Big Bear Lake in the early 1990's. Your mitigation efforts, I am sure, have greatly helped the community. Thank you again.

David_Yegge Your welcome

Julie_Rogers Thanks, everyone!

Judith_Leraas_Cook Thanks for joining us, Julie!

David_Yegge Good questions Julie

Michele_Steinberg Thanks folks - I've gotta sign off now! Cheers!

Julie_Rogers Nice to "hear" your voices, Judith and Michele! I'm working on how to present the Firewise Communities designation to people here. Good stuff!

Judith_Leraas_Cook Julie - Let us hear from you. We are happy to assist.

Julie_Rogers Thanks!

Judith_Leraas_Cook David - You did a FABULOUS job. Thank you!

David_Yegge I guess it worked.

Judith_Leraas_Cook Let us know what we can do to support you as you continue with Firewise.

David_Yegge I hope I answered their questions?

Judith_Leraas_Cook You certainly did. Good answers, too. We have a lot of interest in the mitigation issue as it relates to fire department involvement and citizen action.

David_Yegge I thinking about asking for some video footage especially the footage on fire brands and shake shingle roofs. I can use it as we promote the replacement of shake roofs.

Judith_Leraas_Cook I believe you can work through Michele for that, as she does have access to much of the footage from her office in Quincy.

Judith_Leraas_Cook I am on your side of the country in Washington state.

David_Yegge Ok, Thank you. See I didn't know. Do you know were other individuals were from?

Judith_Leraas_Cook That's the wonderful thing about computers. We log in from just about anywhere. I know, for example, that we had representation from MA, MO, CA, WA, and MT for starters. And there were more. Have a great week. We are so pleased you were able to take the time for our session.

David_Yegge Ok I will log off

Judith_Leraas_Cook Keep in touch, and bye!