

The following is the Firewise chat transcript from Wednesday, March 15, 2006.

Judith_Leraas_Cook Welcome to today's chat. The purpose of the hour is to share information about how Firewise liaisons can use Firewise messages to motivate people to take action regarding wildfire mitigation. My name is Judith Leraas Cook and I am project manager for Firewise Communities/USA and will co-moderate today. Michele Steinberg, Communities Support Manager, will also serve as moderator. Welcome, Michele!

Michele_Steinberg Thanks, Judith. I'm looking forward to this chat. Fire season is underway in many areas, but the peak of fire activity is still several weeks or months away in places around the country. It's a really good time to talk about getting the message out to become Firewise.

Judith_Leraas_Cook We will begin the chat by hearing from Amy Schneider with Fleishman-Hillard, Inc., a leading communications firm that assists the national Firewise Communities program with messaging, media outreach, and tools for public information officers and other responsible for reaching out to the media and the public. She has worked to help position Firewise messages in national media and provide templates for state forestry agencies, federal agencies, and many others to use in talking about Firewise. After we hear from Amy, we will answer questions you have about Firewise messages and reaching media and residents with those messages. We will ask you to hold questions until the end of this presentation. At that point, the chat will become interactive and we encourage you to join in. Amy, what are some of the key Firewise messages the program is providing at this time of year?

Amy_Schneider Thank you, Judith. At this time of year, we're reminding residents that while fire is a natural process, no one wants to see homes and resources lost to wildland fire. And the good news is, we don't have to.

Judith_Leraas_Cook How does the Firewise program deliver these messages to national audiences? What tools does the program use?

Amy_Schneider Residents and communities CAN take action to reduce their wildfire vulnerability through sound community planning, construction, and landscape maintenance. Visit www.firewise.org for tips and tools, and contact your state forestry office for more information about your local hazards. We encourage states to conduct outreach to your local media – that's the most credible source for your local residents, and enables you to give local fire hazard information and vegetation example. From a national standpoint, we do a lot of outreach to publications that reach our various audiences, such as NVFC Dispatch to reach volunteer fire councils and American City and County to reach community leaders. It's important to tailor our messages to these audiences. For example, in the NVFC Dispatch we'll discuss the important role volunteer fire departments play in helping communities get organized. For American City and County, we're currently working with the county supervisor in Madera, CA, to prepare an article that highlights how communities across the U.S. are preparing for wildfire through the Firewise Communities/USA program. We also work with publications that reach residents on a national scale. For example, we provided information to PARADE magazine for an upcoming issue that will offer tips for homeowners to weatherproof their homes.

Judith_Leraas_Cook How can state and federal agencies use these messages to reach residents?

Amy_Schneider The password-protected site for state liaisons at www.firewise.org/usa includes sample message points and materials. Work with your public affairs/information office to be sure they understand the Firewise message and are sharing it with local media. Another great way to reach residents is through direct outreach – meet with homeowner’s associations, church groups, community beautification programs, etc. Also consider the people who influence residents about home related issues – such as real estate agents, architects, landscapers, home construction and remodeling, home improvement retailers, and insurance industry representatives. Sometimes members of the agency or fire service are not the most compelling messengers – sometimes it’s a trusted neighbor. “Someone like me” who did the work on his/her own property illustrates that “I can do it too.” Some of the most interesting presentations pair an agency or fire department representative (The Expert) with an informed resident (The Peer). It’s a powerful approach.

Judith_Leraas_Cook We know that the Firewise program has been successful in getting key messages into various media. How can communities and states get their local media to take notice?

Amy_Schneider First I must say that states are doing a great job in this arena. We monitor local news on a daily basis, and we’re seeing a lot of articles that mention the term “firewise” and/or www.firewise.org. Many other articles talk about similar concepts, even though the term “firewise” isn’t always used. That tells us that states are getting it, and are getting the message out there. A good way to keep this up is to build relationships with your local media. Talk to them in advance of fire season to be sure they have your contact information as a resource. Take the time when there are no current fires in your area to arrange a meeting with the reporter(s) who typically covers wildfires. Sit down and explain a little about fire behavior, what your area can expect this season, and what residents and communities can do to prepare. Use concrete examples of those who have taken action and seen results. This is a good time to explain the broader fire story – some fires are good for the ecosystem, and residents can live compatibly in fire prone areas when they work together to prepare. Then come fire season, send a follow up note to the reporter reminding him/her that you’re available as a resource.

Judith_Leraas_Cook Are there particular messages that seem to motivate people more than others?

Amy_Schneider We have found that listing all the things residents should be doing around their property can be overwhelming; they may throw up their hands and say “I can’t do all that, so I won’t bother doing anything.” Explain that even a few small steps go a long way, and additional steps can be taken over time. Also, the US Forest Service has done social research in this area. According to the research, people are generally not motivated by “sermons” on why they ought to do something or why they ought to accept the actions of others. They are more apt to follow what you or others have identified as an appropriate course of action if they work out a solution or come to a conclusion themselves, with helpful information from specialists. The “Golden Rule” of communicating about hazards is to use window of opportunity. Sophisticated materials don’t have the force of one catastrophe to change how people think and behave in the short term. Customize information to your audience and be inventive by using many

forms of communication. Effective communication campaigns have three things going for them: (1) they raise questions, (2) they offer fairly simple answers, and (3) they have authorities available who can provide additional information and reinforce the message over time.

Judith_Leraas_Cook If a community is planning a Firewise activity or a recognition ceremony, what is the best way for them to reach out to their local media? Do you have any tips for talking with reporters?

Amy_Schneider Yes we do. The password-protected site for state liaisons at www.firewise.org/usa includes a Media Relations Guide, which offers suggestions for inviting media to your event, tips for working with media, and sample materials.

Judith_Leraas_Cook It seems like a lot of the reporting on wildland fire focuses on destruction and firefighting. How can we get reporters to focus on messages about what residents can do to protect themselves?

Amy_Schneider When a fire is currently burning and homes are affected, it is a delicate issue. Communicators must walk a fine line between educating the public about what they can do to protect themselves, and not sounding like you're telling those who just lost their homes that it's their fault. It also may be difficult to get the media's attention. Flames make great pictures, and that's what they'll air/print. They're often too busy reporting on the current fire to worry about "sidebars." One approach is to contact media in neighboring communities where there is no imminent danger and use this "learning moment" to educate media and residents about how to protect themselves for the future.

Judith_Leraas_Cook The chat is now open to everyone. We encourage you to ask questions of all three of us...Amy, Michele and me. Amy mentioned, the Media Kit for the Firewise Communities recognition areas is available to you at www.firewise.org/usa. In addition, the Firewise Communications will soon be available online at the Firewise newsroom at www.firewise.org/newsroom.

Amy_Schneider I'm glad you mentioned the guide that will be in the Newsroom, Judith. This will enable others who communicate about fire issues to access some of the tools the national program has put together. It will include many of the materials currently available in the password-protected site. It will be a simple place to direct reporters and others who are looking for information.

Judith_Leraas_Cook One other thing: Amy will be presenting a class at Backyards & Beyond that will address many of the things she talked about today. In addition, the conference will include a wonderful course especially for state liaisons in which you will all be able to ask questions related to many of the programmatic things you deal with within your specific jurisdictions.

Michele_Steinberg I'd like to let our chat group know about another opportunity for getting the Firewise message sent. We have established a new "Firewise Leadership Award" for individuals or organizations at the local or state/regional levels. If you know a person or an organization that has done outstanding work in the Firewise arena, you can nominate them for this prestigious national award. The deadline is July 31. See more about the nomination at www.firewise.org/award...Sorry, that URL is www.firewise.org/awards.

Amy_Schneider Another upcoming tool is a new NWCG Fire Communication Guide that will address fire education, prevention and mitigation. We're currently looking for

sample materials and case studies. We'd love to hear from the state liaisons. Projects submitted for Firewise Leadership Awards would be perfect.

Judith_Leraas_Cook Once you enter into an effective communications process, wildfire mitigation information flows from neighbor to neighbor. That's how Firewise works. Amy's information is invaluable in getting this phenomenon started.

Amy_Schneider And the Firewise Communities/USA program is an excellent framework for organizing communities. It makes neighboring communities sit up and take notice, and provides countless opportunities for sharing success stories with media and community leaders.

Judith_Leraas_Cook We are noticing that, once an initial contact is made in an area, interest builds. Sometimes it is that interest that piques the interest of the local media.

Michele_Steinberg Jason, I think we have seen some recent media on Kansas and wildfires. How are you handling media outreach or communications on Firewise issues?

Jason_Hartman Like has been mentioned I sent out mass emails towards the beginning of the fire season to let media know I am available for assistance and technical info.

Judith_Leraas_Cook Vickie - Your media season will be starting soon. Are there things we can do to support you?

Vickie_Idaho_Liaison Aside from lack of funding, we have messages that are ready to go

Judith_Leraas_Cook Good news on the messaging front!

Judith_Leraas_Cook Paul - How are things coming along in MI??

Paul_Kollmeyer USFS had a big fire Sunday. I am talking with the Michigan State Cooperative Extension today about how to build on this event to increase awareness.

Judith_Leraas_Cook Are you working with Mark Hansen? He and I have e-mailed a bit back and forth.

Paul_Kollmeyer Yes, I plan to call him today after he gets out of another meeting. We are getting together for two days next week.

Judith_Leraas_Cook He is doing some good work. In fact, we met during the pilot phase of Firewise Communities/USA.

Paul_Kollmeyer Mark is a real advocate of Firewise and with the Cooperative Extension contacts it makes it easier to get to the local officials.

Judith_Leraas_Cook Exactly. I know he has worked very effectively creating a fire-resistant plant list and has produced some first-rate PSAs for you.

Amy_Schneider Vickie, Jason, Paul, Gena - I'd be interested to learn whether state liaisons are responsible for reaching out to media during fire season with the Firewise message, or if the calls are funneled through your public information officers?

Jason_Hartman KFS is part of the Kansas State University system, I am responsible, but I have access to the Universities media relations folks for their expertise and assistance.

Vickie_Idaho_Liaison It seems the responsibility would lie with the liaisons or their designees. I am personally very busy on fires so it is usually handled by our area offices.

Amy_Schneider Liaisons and your teams are definitely most equipped with the technical expertise. Many agencies prefer to have public information officers work with media to ensure consistent information flow. If the latter is the case, it's important that they get the information and understand priorities.

Judith_Leraas_Cook Media contact varies from state to state. However, it is my understanding that the state liaisons find themselves making many personal contacts within communities. Is this perception correct?

Vickie_Idaho_Liaison For Idaho that is correct, Judith.

Judith_Leraas_Cook I know that is the case in WA and CA as well, and several other states in the West.

Amy_Schneider Would it be helpful to the liaisons for us to build a network of communicators as well? Or is it best to channel the information for public information officers through you?

Paul_Kollmeyer In Michigan it works best to go through the liaison. I would make the contact to the department press office.

Vickie_Idaho_Liaison For Firewise specific information, it would probably be best to channel all of the info to the liaison (at least in Idaho)

Judith_Leraas_Cook It is my understanding that the Firewise liaisons generally prefer to coordinate program communications materials. This keeps you apprised of everything going on with the program. Is this correct? We are asking so that we can do the best job for you. Your guidance is really important to us!

Vickie_Idaho_Liaison Correct.

Paul_Kollmeyer That would be true for me as well.

Jason_Hartman Yes, that's the preference but I do not get upset if I see something in the media that didn't go thru me as long as it's correct information.

Amy_Schneider Is there anything we can do to help you educate press offices on Firewise? Or help you give them the tools they need?

Vickie_Idaho_Liaison Is there a one-page Firewise fact sheet available?

Jason_Hartman Most of the tools are at the website with more coming. Simply guiding them to the website is a good resource.

Amy_Schneider We do have a one-page "Tip Sheet" that offers a brief list of general tips for residents and encourages them to go to the Web site for more info. We also have a fact sheet on the program that's about two pages.

Michele_Steinberg I'm curious what you all (state folks) think are the facts that are most likely to get missed, or misconstrued, by the media or the public.

Judith_Leraas_Cook Would it be useful for us to post the two-page fact sheet in the password-protected area for your use?

Vickie_Idaho_Liaison The one that I hear the most is that following the landscaping tips will lead to "moonscaping". Lots of re-education on that.

Amy_Schneider The program fact sheet is indeed now available in the password protected site - though it will be replaced soon with an updated version..

Judith_Leraas_Cook Thanks, Amy!

Vickie_Idaho_Liaison Judith, I'm looking for a one-pager that briefly details what Firewise is about. Need something easy and quickly digestible to post.

Judith_Leraas_Cook Aha! I see. Amy - Do we have anything that approximates Vickie's needs? Do you want this information to be mainly concerned with the recognition program? Or the program in its entirety?

Vickie_Idaho_Liaison If not I can create something myself. Speaking of which, is the new logo image available for download?

Michele_Steinberg Re moonscaping, Vickie, I also hear that a lot. We use a lot of graphics and visuals to show how Firewise landscaping can be aesthetically pleasing and environmentally compatible. The book "Firewise: Where We Live, How We Live" is a good example.

Judith_Leraas_Cook You will be interested to learn that within two weeks we will be introducing an entirely updated web area at firewise.org. The new logo will be downloadable from the site at that time, and you will find many other improvements and updates. We hope you will take a good look at us and give us lots of feedback!

Vickie_Idaho_Liaison Will do.

Judith_Leraas_Cook Thanks!

Jason_Hartman How about an email notification when the new site is fully up?

Amy_Schneider Vicki - We do have a fact sheet with some simple language that you can post. I will email it to you this afternoon. It will be included on the updated Firewise Communications Guide that is coming soon; each state liaison will receive a CD for convenient repeat usage.

Judith_Leraas_Cook We will certainly be doing that, Jason...both to the liaisons and via a Firewise Alert.

Jason_Hartman Thanks

Amy_Schneider Other items on the new Communications Guide due to popular demand is an updated community presentation, new logos and artwork, and new program materials.

Judith_Leraas_Cook Another hour has passed in your wonderful company! FYI - When the upgraded web area is online, all the 2006 chat sessions will be posted in the forum area, including today's.

Vickie_Idaho_Liaison I've got a meeting in a minute...thank you all for the info.

Judith_Leraas_Cook We would like to thank you for spending time with us again. Our next chat will be a general one, scheduled for June 14...same time and same place. Jason - Be sure to let us know if you need assistance. Gena - I am not familiar with you. Should you need to reach us for program assistance, you can e-mail me at firewiseusa@aol.com.

Michele_Steinberg Thanks folks! Judith and Amy, meet you on the conference call in 5 minutes?

Judith_Leraas_Cook Sure, Michele. Bye!!

Amy_Schneider Meet you there.

Michele_Steinberg Bye for now.

Jason_Hartman Thanks for the info. Bye for now