



Transcript
Firewise Communities Chat Session
July 18, 2007

judithleraascook Welcome to today's chat session. The purpose of the hour is for us to share information about being prepared for wildfire season.....

[69.29.196.194] **judithleraascook** My name is Judith Leraas Cook, and I am the project manager for Firewise Communities/USA. Today, Michele Steinberg, support manager for the Firewise Communities program, and I will moderate the presentation. Welcome, Michele!

Michele_Steinberg Thanks, Judith. I'm delighted we can use our website to connect people from all over the country on this chat!

judithleraascook Today we are going to hear from Sue Barkwood, who is a forester with the Anchorage Fire Department in the Wildfire Mitigation Office. Sue is an extremely dynamic woman who is well acquainted with the importance of wildfire preparedness issues, the topic of today's chat session. She was awarded a Firewise Leadership award in November 2006 at the Backyards & Beyond conference in Denver. We are delighted she has taken the time to be with us today. Please hold your questions until the end of Sue's presentation. When she has finished, the chat will become completely interactive. We encourage you to join in at that time. Sue, we know that homeowner preparation can strongly affect a structure's survival. What mitigation tasks do you recommend that people complete before wildfire season?

Sue_Barkwood First of all, Firewise is not a one-time, fix-it solution. It's a way of life and an attitude. Firewise applies to your home, your property, and your family. For a resident, it's important to understand your regional fire danger season and what "fuels" influence wildland urban interface fires. Remember that the only reason that there is a "wildland urban interface fire PROBLEM", is because we build our homes in forests and grasslands that burn, and have burned for thousands of years.

Preparing your Firewise home is an annual maintenance item, just like raking leaves (and shoveling snow). Before wildfire season, take a walk around your home. What is combustible? And, is it connected to the home?

Remove all combustible items away from the home, off the deck, out from under the deck, and near other outbuildings on your property. Combustible materials include anything that burns: leaves, needles, dead grass, firewood, ATVs, dog kennel straw, etc.

We can get really specific here about decking, roofing and vegetation. But, the most important thing to remember is to consider all of these items when preparing for wildfire. We can address construction materials too.

judithleraascook Thank you! From a community point of view, are there things that members of homeowners associations and small communities can do together to improve their wildfire readiness?

Sue_Barkwood Get to know your neighbors! You might need them to help you during a fire or any other emergency. This can also help by keeping a "watchful" eye on your street. Go to the local community council or homeowner association meeting. Meet the local leaders and have an open discussion about emergency preparedness.

Ask the local fire department or state forestry office if they could send their battalion chief or forester to visit with your group to discuss fire response. There may be some very important issues going on with equipment, fire suppression staffing, distance, roads, bridges, etc. that might limit their capability in getting to your home.

judithleraascook We find ourselves, now, in the middle of wildfire season. And with fire season comes fire weather weather and its associated potential for wildfire. Do you have suggestions for our participants regarding extra things they should do on days when fire danger is high?

Sue_Barkwood If you are on a well system or otherwise dependent on electricity to get water, ensure that you have a cistern or other water source that you or firefighters can use. It's very likely that the power will be turned off during a fire, or it will go out because of fuel or fire causing an interruption. Do you have a pump, hose and a generator?

If you have a cedar shake roof and/or a wood deck attached to your home, have a sprinkler set up on the roof so that you can keep the surface moist during the day. A light misting to douse your roof and decking could save your home from ignition from burning embers.

Also, take in all of your lawn furniture that has cushions, dog beds on the deck and other items than could "trap" embers. Pull drapes and furniture away from the windows. Make sure that your emergency kit is in your car with you! And that your children know what to do in the event of fire.

judithleraascook Thanks! Is there anything else people can do within their communities to help save their homes?

Sue_Barkwood Joining forces with your neighbors is a powerful tool. Be prepared to be your own firefighting resource. Have water, tools, hose, pumps and sturdy clothing and boots. Be prepared to put out little spot fires after the flaming front has passed.

Many homes burn down in these hours after the fire because a small collection of embers has been trapped. They simmer for a while until enough heat ignites a combustible surface nearby. This is likely to happen after the fire fighters have done their initial "triage" to determine who needs assistance right of way.

Working together can save lives and homes. For example, if one neighbor has a tractor or a rotor tiller, they could put in a make-shift fire line around homes. Another neighbor might have a pool, pond or stream. A continuous hose lay could provide water to several homes nearby.

Educate yourself about using these types of resources. The local firefighters are going to have a tough job. Knowledge is power. But, don't mistake it for courage that is beyond your capability.

judithleraascook This is really about working together, isn't it? We are also interested in the role firebrands (embers) play in igniting homes during a wildfire. Would you explain?

Sue_Barkwood Let's imagine that a fire is burning in the spruce or pine forest. This fire becomes intense and flames spread over the forest floor and "climb" up into the trees. Burning branches and tree limbs are caught by the wind generated by the fire itself. This force accelerates and the resulting wind carries these "fire brands" or burning embers into the air. A collection of these can land on your roof or deck. Imagine spilling your charcoal grill on your cedar shake roof. How long would it take to ignite the roof?

The research has shown that this effect can be serious. A firefighter will tell you that putting out a fire on a roof is dangerous. Very quickly, this fire becomes "involved" with the structure. If you consider the density of materials that make up your home, there is a lot of fuel in the structure. Your home is now fuel that perpetuates the fire. Burning embers are a major consequence of any wildland fire. Even surface fires in grass or shrubs can project embers ahead of the "flaming front". Is that enough detail?

judithleraascook Yes! Great! So, Sue, how has the Firewise Communities program helped you to reach Anchorage residents?

Sue_Barkwood The Firewise program has the infrastructure already set up for uniting homeowners. As an agency, we use it as a "turn key" operation to communicate the Firewise principles to residents at community council meetings, through radio and other media. I appreciate the ease of the application process. It's not intimidating to the community councils. The requirements of the program are workable, effective and acknowledge the efforts of the residents. Firewise has all of the critical elements so well documented that it's easy to point to the references and cater them to specific local issues. Here in Alaska, we made our own "Firewise Alaska" booklet (through the Alaska Wildland Fire Coordinating Group). At the Anchorage Fire Department, we made a wildfire calendar that depicts local issues. The work of Jack Cohen and the case studies of past fires is the key that grips residents. Whether in a public meeting or using media, the quotes and statistics that he has generated, really make the point about roofing and safe evacuations. As a side note, our website has incorporated these concepts into "Firewise Tips". We direct our local residents here for more information.

www.muni.org/fire under Wildfire Mitigation. Firewise Communities is effective and accounts for the methods that work to engage the public.

judithleraascook Thank you, Sue! That is excellent information. We'll post the transcript of today's chat in the 'Chat Transcripts' area of the Firewise forum within the next few days. The chat is now open to everyone. Feel free to ask questions of Sue, Michele and myself. For more information, you can contact me later at firewiseusa@aol.com.

Sue_Barkwood If I may, I'd like to point out two really good references. One is a book by Joan Webster called The complete bushfire safety book. This documents the WUI problem in Australia, but the concept applies globally. The second is the book by Stephen Pyne: Fire in America. There are dynamic examples of firefighting tactics used by the pioneers. Also, a comprehensive history of fire across America, including Alaska.

judithleraascook Thank you! These are really fine works. I am curious to know the City of Anchorage's position on wildfire evacuation.

Sue_Barkwood Good question. Since the entire Municipality is more of an "intermix" than an "interface", we have to give the appropriate message to the residents. Evacuation may cause more harm than good. There are so many "traps" in the terrain and the fuel type, that leaving your home may be very dangerous. We encourage residents to leave their home if they 1) know a fire is happening in the area, and 2) if police or fire personnel ask them to leave.

However, there's a good chance we won't be able to communicate directly with everyone. We have specific safety tips for residents concerning sheltering in place. Knowing how to do it and only doing it if the home has excellent defensible space are two critical items. We acknowledge that it's the resident's choice to evacuate, but if we encounter resistance in notification we will ask them to sign a "right of refusal" form that documents their next of kin. Minors and other people without the capacity to make the decision will be escorted.

judithleraascook Thanks! Does the Anchorage Fire Department work with local homeowners associations with any frequency?

Sue_Barkwood We attend the community council meetings usually twice a year. There are about 9 primary councils and 11 others that we stay in touch with. We do get requests from the homeowner associations. We likely do about 3-4 of those presentations a year. It's a good way to connect with people directly. Of course, we should always do more!

Mr_FL_Mit Sue, does your agency do formal Hazard Assessments (such as the NFPA 1144) or do you recommend homeowners do their own?

Sue_Barkwood We conduct a firewise assessment for homeowners that request it (through our website or phone). It's an assessment that we have created here locally. It is based on NFPA 1144, but catered to specific Alaska forest types and likely home ignitions.

Michael_Templeton Sue. Is it possible to see a copy of your assessment - here in the Yukon we use the FireSmart assessment and I would like to compare the two?

Sue_Barkwood Absolutely. Michael, one version is on our website at www.muni.org/fire. It's called the Firewise home assessment. Also, you can connect with me via email: barkwoods@muni.org. FireSmart is a great work. Much of our program stems from FireSmart as well. Since the Anchorage Fire Department offers financial assistance in tree removal, we do require that homeowners do the essential items directly around their structure before they get their reimbursement.

Michele_Steinberg FYI, NFPA 1144 has recently been revised and is now called "Standard for Reducing Structure Ignitions from Wildland Fire". It has a couple new ways to do structure ignition assessments. It'll be available soon to view or purchase at www.nfpa.org.

Michael_Templeton Sue. Thanks - another reference for the folks is the FireSmart Community manual - it can be downloaded in pdf format at <http://www.partnersinprotection.ab.ca/downloads/>

judithleraascook Thank you, Michael!

Sue_Barkwood The FireSmart manual has specific vegetation suggestions for the boreal forest type. So, it applies to anyone in Alaska, Canada, Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan.

judithleraascook Good. Most interesting. To honor our commitment of a one-hour chat, I would like to thank all of you for joining us today. Because we have so many wonderful references available on the web, you may want to check out the transcript that will be posted later in the week. It will contain the URLs that our participants have shared. And, Sue, an especial thanks to you. Your information was wonderful, and so well expressed. Chatting was a delight.

Sue_Barkwood Likewise. Thank you for having me. It's an honor to be here and to be a part of Firewise Communities.

judithleraascook And it is a pleasure to have you! We are planning a session for August 8 about evacuation. It should be a good one, too.

Michael_Templeton thank you judith and michele for hosting this chat

judithleraascook And thank you for joining us, Michael! And for providing us with the information available on your web site in Alberta.

Michele_Steinberg Great to "see" you all. Chat with you again soon!

Kim Thank you, see you next month!

judithleraascook We will look forward to it!

Sue_Barkwood Cheers!

judithleraascook Bye for now!