



Transcript
Firewise Communities Chat Session
August 26, 2008

Judith_Leraas_Cook Welcome to today's Firewise chat session. And thank you for joining us. Today's chat guest is Dr. Kelly Hurt with Freelance Consulting, Inc. Kelly is heavily involved in the creation of Firewise Communities/USA sites in both Arkansas and Oklahoma and is a strong proponent of the Firewise process and Firewise practices. Our focus for today is wildfire preparedness --- what individuals and communities can do to maximize their fire readiness during fire season or if wildfire threatens. Kelly has experience with that, too. My name is Judith Leraas Cook and I am the 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 Thank you, Judith. I'm glad to see so many people here.

Judith_Leraas_Cook Thanks, Michele. Kelly we are so pleased you are able to join us today. Before we get going, I would like to let our guests know that you have worked with both the Firewise liaison for Arkansas and for the state of Oklahoma in a successful effort to interest communities in taking action related to wildfire readiness. During this process, you have seen communities as they prepare for fire and, just as important, what preparation can do to avoid loss should a wildfire threaten. For purposes of the chat, we will ask our guests to hold questions until the end of the presentation. The chat will then become completely interactive. You started working with Firewise Communities some years ago, and I believe it was in Arkansas. Would you tell us how you became involved with the program?

Kelly_Hurt I was working for Dynamac Corporation in 2003 and 2004. We started diversifying into range/natural resource management. The firewise program was a natural step forward for us. During one of our presentations at a conference, David Samuel of Arkansas Forestry became interested in us. From there, I began to follow up with David over the course of time and a job transition until finally Arkansas Firewise/Forestry contracted me to conduct our first four community projects. Since then, we have continued to strengthen our professional relationship and bring other communities into the program. For the most part, I handle the large communities.

Judith_Leraas_Cook You recently began working with Oklahoma communities, and we now have two recognized sites in that state---Grant and Allen. What was the great motivator for them with respect to wildfire preparation?

Kelly_Hurt 2005 and 2006 were extremely tough fire seasons in Oklahoma and Texas. In fact, they were so continuous, you could consider them one extended fire season. People, citizens and firefighters, lost their lives, homes, and livestock. The whole state was shook up for a while and there was a lot of interest in funding fire programs. This resulted in increased interest in proactive programs such as Firewise. Over time, the level of interest has waned because of the onset of unusually heavy rainfalls over the past couple of years, but the leadership community still recognizes the threat.

Judith_Leraas_Cook What have you observed about community wildfire preparation as folks stay with the program for a period of years?

Kelly_Hurt the most important preparation is the preparation of the mind. For any of these plans to work, individuals must know the plan exists, learn about it and then choose to believe in the threat and the plan. If people accept that the threat is real and that proactive steps can make a difference, then they usually implement. If enough accept this as conventional wisdom, then you have a truly Firewise community. In the case of Holiday Island, AR we saw a significant increase in homes with a low risk ranking over a five year period. this was because of a concerted effort to reduce fuels in the home ignition zone. this effort was spearheaded by the local fire department and firewise volunteers. Residents were encouraged to put cuttings on the curb and then volunteers would come by and chip them, creating a mulch for the homeowners. Also, the Fire Chief was smart about how he influenced neighborhoods. He would approach one likely implementer and get them excited about the program. As they created a Firewise home, the neighbors started to like how the yard and home looked and would follow suit. It was a version of keeping up with the Joneses'. So one Firewise home quickly became many firewise homes in a cluster. However, in clusters where he couldn't find a leader, nothing happened. Lake Hamilton Fire Department and Firewise Board chose to conduct controlled burns. That in addition to an aggressive outreach program resulted in a 100% decrease in grass and brush fires. Those kinds of results indicate that they were successful in transforming Firewise into the collective mindset of the community.

Judith_Leraas_Cook Kelly - I know you have significant wildfire activity where you live--- and that you live in Allen (Oklahoma's first recognized Firewise site). Would you share a story about a home that survived wildfire due to the work its owners did before the event? I know our guests would like to hear about that.

Kelly_Hurt Fires in Oklahoma are very fast and aggressive because of the fine fuels (grass), droughts and high winds. We tend to have smaller, very fast fires that can strike before anyone can respond. In fact, we have several of them a month. One case that stands out was a home where the owners decided to plant a rye grass buffer around it. So instead of the house being

ringed by dead, dessicated Bermuda grass, it was surrounded by a beautiful green lawn of rye grass. When a grass fire approached the home, it didn't have a chance to burn near the house because of the rye grass. A few dollars of grass seed saved a home.

Judith_Leraas_Cook A good tale! On a slightly different topic, do you have recommendations that will help homeowners/communities should a wildfire threaten?

Kelly_Hurt I think that communities need to focus on outreach leading up to the fire season when fire threat starts to enter the collective mindset. Everyone has more than they can do these days and so people are constantly prioritizing. The key is to hit them as the risk is increasing and really drive Firewise up their priority list. It isn't always a bad thing to back off just a little when the risk is low and then hit them hard later. Timing is everything. The most attendees I've had at a Firewise meeting was right after a wildfire threatened a community. People were concerned and wanted to know what they could do. You have to be ready to capitalize on emotional times to get people to take action.

Judith_Leraas_Cook Thank you! Any other thoughts that you would like to add?

Kelly_Hurt Patience and perseverance are the keys. Don't expect everyone to gladly embrace the program. There are times when a community just will not respond. In other cases, they do for a year or so and then drop out of the program. Others get in and stay in for the long term. You have to be ready for that reality. However, you just have to keep trying and talking with the knowledge that at some level the Firewise program sinks in. You may not see any evidence of this until later, but the information becomes a latent knowledge that can be remembered when a community is threatened...

Chatfirewise Hi Dr. Hurt. This is Mike Frost from Whitefish, MT, I'm signed in as 'chatfirewise' today. Thanks for your presentation. It was very helpful.

Kelly_Hurt The best example I have seen is David Samuel of Arkansas Firewise. He routinely wears out his tires driving around Arkansas to talk to the smallest communities about the program. He has as many disappointments as he does successes but he just keeps plugging away. You never know, some of the communities that don't respond or don't last long in the program may be like dormant seeds, just waiting for something to happen to cause them to spring to life again.

Judith_Leraas_Cook That was wonderful information. We will post the transcript of today's session in the 'Chat Transcripts' area of the Firewise Forum very soon. The chat is now open. Feel free to ask questions of Kelly, Michele and myself. Glad you were pleased with the presentation, Mike!

Kelly_Hurt Yes, thanks Mike.

Judith_Leraas_Cook If you have questions after the chat, you can contact me at

firewiseusa@aol.com.

Kelly_Hurt I would like to ask how many of the attendees today have had similar experiences.

Chatfirewise Sorry about jumping the gun. I accidentally hit the key before I finished. Dr. Hurt, do insurance companies play any part in your effort to inspire communities to become firewise?

Kelly_Hurt State Farm was part of the Allen, OK project. They had just gotten slammed for being cold hearted after hurricane Katrina. So they were looking for ways to proactively reach out to a community before something bad happened. They worked with us on some ads, etc.

Jessica_Yahnke Where I live in Nebraska there was a 1300 acre fire that destroyed 10 homes, when I asked homeowners why they rebuilt in the same location (even though fire hazards still exist), they said it was b/c of the insurance. Are you finding this as a problem in OK & AR

Kelly_Hurt What about the insurance encouraged them to rebuild?

Jessica_Yahnke The landowners were told that unless they rebuilt in the exact same location they would only receive 60% of their insurance claim. They were told they couldn't even move it back 20 feet. Most homes were on the edge of heavily forested canyons

Kelly_Hurt Really? I've never heard that before. Here in Oklahoma, my insurance pays even if I don't choose to rebuild. I can't see where an insurance company would care but it may be a policy thing with them. Do you know what company it was? Were they counting the foundations and concrete slabs as unaffected by the fire and therefore valued at 40% of the home value?

Jessica_Yahnke No, I don't know the company. I was recently hired to help with fuel treatment projects and was told by various individuals this info, but no names. I am not sure on what grounds the insurance was only valuing 60%

Kelly_Hurt If you stand back and look at it, there are two things that can be moved or removed. One is the home and the other would be the fuels. If they can't move the homes, then they certainly need to look into fuel mitigation into the canyons.

Judith_Leraas_Cook Kelly - Good point, Kelly. Kind of the 'preparation of the mind'.

Jessica_Yahnke I have grant money to help with fuel treatment projects, but you nailed it on the head when you said some people go for it and other just won't. It all depends on the timing and most people have forgotten about how devastating that fire was two years ago and don't think that could possibly happen again

Kelly_Hurt Knowledge is so valuable. I look back at our fire seasons in 2005 and 2006 and think about how much could have been saved if people had just known what to do.

Chatfirewise When we mention the possibility that insurance companies might not insure homes in the future that aren't properly 'firewised', it gets people's attention. Our experience with community interest being tied to a 'spark plug' or two who take the project on, is very similar to yours Dr. Hurt.

Kelly_Hurt My only concern about the negative insurance approach (i.e., raising rates for non-Firewise homes) is that it will give people a negative attitude about a very positive program.

Judith_Leraas_Cook I tend to agree, Kelly. We need communities to understand the benefits of becoming Firewise and that takes patience and perseverance.

Michele_Steinberg This discussion is interesting. We are going to feature insurance information in the next Firewise "How To" newsletter coming out in December.

Kelly_Hurt However, there is an old saying that people don't do what they are "expected to do" but rather what they are "inspected" to do.

Chatfirewise Great idea.

Michele_Steinberg I think the newsletter will help clear up some widely held misconceptions folks have about insurance and wildfire.

Kelly_Hurt I would love to see the positive reinforced (i.e. rate cuts or tax breaks associated with Firewise compliance).

Judith_Leraas_Cook Kelly - Thank you so much for agreeing to spend an hour with us! As you can tell, we were all most interested in your presentation. Are you working with other OK and AR communities right now?

Kelly_Hurt I am finishing up with Lake Hamilton and Red Oak Communities in Arkansas, and have some projects cooking here in Oklahoma.

Judith_Leraas_Cook Good news for them!

Kelly_Hurt One of the things that I am most excited about is some of the mapping projects that I am doing. I am creating GIS maps for communities who don't have any maps at all.

Judith_Leraas_Cook I know they will find them useful.

Kelly_Hurt they do, I give them aerials with the lots and streets overlaid and a database behind it that has all of their Firewise and address info included.

Judith_Leraas_Cook That has to help in getting that 'mind preparation' out in front.

Kelly_Hurt Yes, it does. they can use the aerials to see where large tracts of fuel border developed areas and then plan out how they would respond.

Chatfirewise The GIS maps sound very interesting. We're putting maps together for our local fire department (they currently don't have them for subdivisions outside of town). Can you tell me where can I find more info about it?

Kelly_Hurt You can call me at 580 857 2555 and I can try to give you some pointers.

Chatfirewise Thank you. I'll do that.

Judith_Leraas_Cook Just so everyone knows, our next open chat will be October 8, and the topic will be Backyards & Beyond, the conference that will be held in November in Tampa.

Kelly_Hurt I will be presenting a statistical study on the improvement of Holiday Island, AR at the meeting. It has five years of data.

Judith_Leraas_Cook We will be looking forward to that! To honor our commitment to keeping the chat to a one-hour timeframe, I would like to thank all of you for joining us today. It was a great session.

Chatfirewise Thanks again Juith. Talk with ya soon.

Kelly_Hurt Thanks, Goodbye

Michele_Steinberg Thanks, Kelly - great job! Thank you everyone.

Jessica_Yahnke Thanks for all your great insight!

Judith_Leraas_Cook Glad you could all attend!

Michele_Steinberg Jessica - feel free to contact us anytime. I'm at msteinberg@nfpa.org; 617-984-7487

Jessica_Yahnke I may end up doing that. Thanks!

Michele_Steinberg Thanks, Judith, for getting this organized! Talk to you soon -

Judith_Leraas_Cook Your next How-To Newsletter should be a hot seller!

Kelly_Hurt hope i did alright

Judith_Leraas_Cook You were great. Perfect, in fact. Thank you!

Chatfirewise Hi Judith. On another matter, I'm still unable to get into the site you wanted me to review. I'll keep trying.

Kelly_Hurt bye, signing off now.

Judith_Leraas_Cook Bye!

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