

Community rallies to protect homes from wildfire

Walker County, Texas

Wildfires swept across Texas in 2011, burning nearly 4 million acres. News reports showed communities where hundreds of homes were destroyed. But the story most Texans didn't hear was that more than 39,000 homes were saved – able to survive a wildfire, often without the benefit of firefighting resources. The reality that many residents face unknowingly is that, under extreme conditions, there just aren't enough resources to protect every home.

“Many hands make light loads. Together we can do tremendous amounts.”

- Walker County Emergency Management Coordinator Butch Davis

Allocating resources and determining when to evacuate a neighborhood in the face of a dangerous and costly wildfire can place a tremendous burden on emergency management personnel. Sometimes the toughest call is deciding which homes can be saved. But a little planning can go a long way to protect a community before disaster strikes. That's the philosophy embraced by the leadership of Walker County, Texas.

Crafting a Community Wildfire Protection Plan

In 2005, Walker County leaders met with Justice Jones, Wildland Urban Interface and Prevention Coordinator for Texas A&M Forest Service. Their mission was to identify wildfire risks, create mitigation strategies and devise a plan that would empower residents to protect their homes and property.

“It sounded like a lot of work,” said John Hobbs, Assistant Fire Chief for the City of Huntsville. “But we believed in it. We worked really well together. To make it work, you have to get a partner. Texas A&M Forest Service knows how to get people motivated and educated. And really, it's for the safety of your own home. It's protecting *your* home, *your* community.”



The Midway/Cowboy Church Fire burned more than 2,400 acres in Walker County in June 2011.

Walker County Emergency Management Coordinator Butch Davis agreed that preparing a Community Wildfire Protection Plan seemed daunting, but was made easier by the guidance of partnering agencies.

“Many hands make light loads,” Davis said. “Together we can do tremendous amounts.”

The community leaders who met back in 2005 became a working group that created the first countywide Community Wildfire Protection Plan in Texas. The group, still intact with its original members, determines when the plan needs to be updated and ensures the identified risks are being mitigated.

During the planning process, the group identified its high-risk areas and began mitigating, even before the plan was finished. They were committed to prioritizing efforts regardless of demographics, assigning the first project – a shaded fuel break – to protect a historically-underserved community.

Texas A&M Forest Service Director Tom Boggus said Walker County’s diverse stakeholder group showed a strong sense of pride in the community as a whole, and fostered a sense of teamwork among the residents.

“What a great example of Texans helping Texans,” Boggus said. “Walker County came together and showed what can be done when we all work toward a common goal – protecting the people and property in their community. They’ve accomplished so much in a very short amount of time. The bar is set high for the rest of our state.”

After Walker County’s Community Wildfire Protection Plan was complete and approved by all the necessary entities, the group set out to protect other communities at risk. That included the Elkins Lake subdivision, situated in the Sam Houston National Forest.

Securing funds

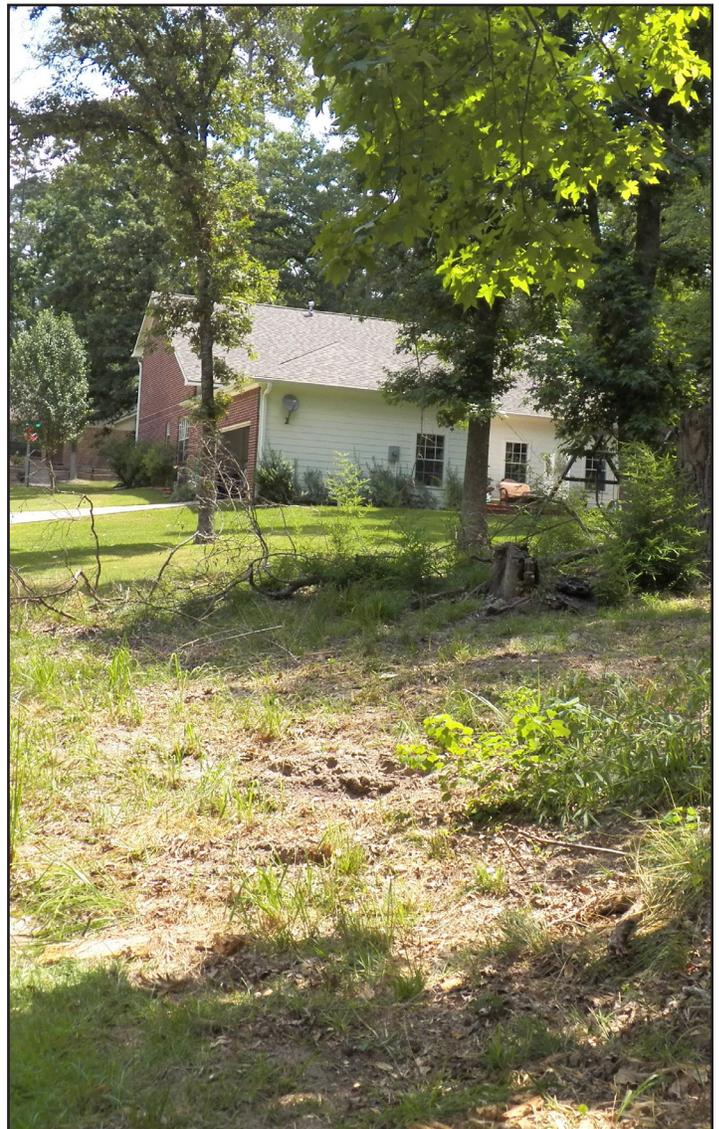
Walker County, with technical assistance from Texas A&M Forest Service’s Wildland Urban Interface staff, applied for and received the first grant for wildfire hazard mitigation in the state’s history. They used the funds to clear 200 feet of “defensible space” around the perimeter of Elkins Lake.

Defensible space is an area between a structure and the wildland that creates a sufficient buffer to slow or halt the spread of wildfire to a structure.

“They cracked the code, so to speak, for other communities to tap into this important funding source and follow suit,” said Texas A&M Forest Service’s Justice Jones.



A shaded fuel break is created when trees in a forested area are thinned and pruned, creating a break in vegetation but retaining some crown canopy. A fuel break can reduce fire risks and rates of spread.



Vegetation was thinned around this Elkins Lake home to reduce the probability of wildfire spreading through the forest and damaging the home.

The U.S. Forest Service worked to ensure that out of 13 southern states vying for funding, the Elkins Lake project was deemed top priority. Because the community is surrounded by U.S. Forest Service and private lands, it took a joint effort to implement the fuels reduction project.

“Due to the number of homes and families in Elkins Lake, fuel mitigation is important to reduce their risk,” said Jordan Beakley, a fuels and prevention specialist with the U.S. Forest Service. “We felt this project would be extremely beneficial.”

Empowering residents

Throughout the process of developing the Community Wildfire Protection Plan and laboring to make neighborhoods safer from wildfire, the working group employed another prong to their strategy: empowering homeowners. They did that by sharing the Ready, Set, Go! program every chance they got.

Ready, Set, Go! is a national program designed for fire departments to teach residents how to prepare their homes and families for the threat of wildfire, understand current conditions and evacuate early when necessary.
<http://wildlandfirersg.org/>

It worked. The residents understood that fire officials weren't trying to encroach on their property or take away their trees, but wanted to take strategic action to protect their homes from wildfire. And the residents wanted to protect their homes, too. The Elkins Lake community pooled \$15,000 to go toward mulching and fuels reduction.



“A healthy forest is a fire-resilient forest,” Jones said. “Cutting down all the trees won't solve problems. What we strive for is awareness and empowerment. In Walker County, the community has backed our mitigation and prevention strategies. They believe in this. That's the real success story. No one asked them to invest \$15,000.”

“In Walker County, the community has backed our mitigation and prevention strategies. They believe in this. That's the real success story.”

- Texas A&M Forest Service Wildland Urban Interface and Prevention Coordinator Justice Jones



Representatives from the U.S. Forest Service and Texas A&M Forest Service joined Walker County and Huntsville officials to celebrate the Elkins Lake community's Firewise designation on May 19, 2012.



That amount of money – \$15,000 – is half the price tag to fly a heavy air tanker over a wildfire for one hour.

“In the history of East Texas, we never had losses like we did last year,” Jones pointed out. “You can’t afford not to mitigate.”

Assistant Chief Hobbs noted that making the residents a partner in the wildfire protection planning process is also key to ensuring their safety.

“We need them to understand the importance of evacuation,” he said. “Wildfires in this environment produce massive amounts of heat and embers. Until we started doing this research, we didn’t know what the possibilities were. That’s why I’m out there doing Ready, Set, Go! programs. If I can get one person to mitigate the risk to their home or develop an evacuation plan, I’ve earned my salary. In Elkins Lake, we’ve won over way more than one person. They’ve done their homework, and that might be what keeps me off CNN News.”

In May 2012, Elkins Lake earned its Firewise Communities designation – another first for Walker County.

“When you’ve got as many risks as we do, this is time well spent. If we don’t save but one life, it was worth every hour devoted to this project.”

- Walker County Emergency Management Coordinator Butch Davis

To become recognized as “Firewise,” a community must obtain a wildfire risk assessment, form a board or committee, create an action plan, hold a community cleanup day, invest a minimum of \$2 per capita in local Firewise actions each year and submit an application to the state Firewise liaison.

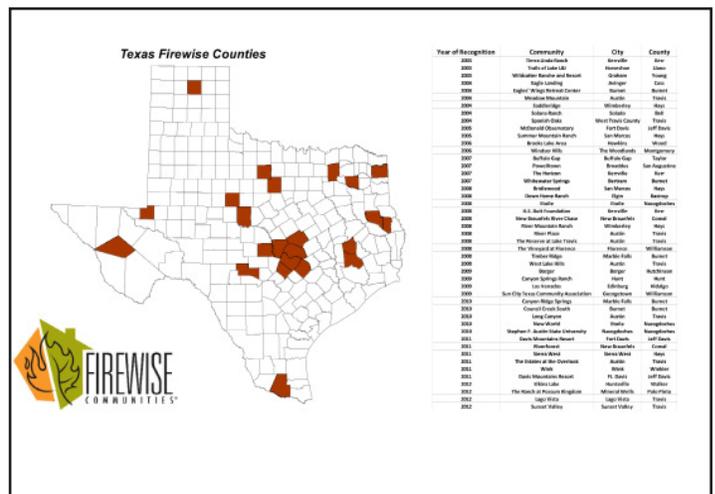
<http://www.firewise.org/>

Butch Davis, the county’s Emergency Management Coordinator, said the Community Wildfire Protection Plan has made great strides toward showing elected officials where the threats are and what can be done to mitigate hazards. Walker County Judge Danny Pierce and the Commissioners Court, along with the Huntsville City Council, have shown tremendous support of the group’s efforts, Davis said. The Huntsville Public Works Department has even committed to mowing 85 miles worth of fire breaks around the city.

“When you’ve got as many risks as we do, this is time well spent,” Davis said. “If we don’t save but one life, it was worth every hour devoted to this project.”



Texas A&M Forest Service assists with a fuel mitigation project on a Firewise community cleanup day.



Putting the plan to the test

Like most of the Lone Star State, the Walker County region saw significant fire activity in 2011.

The Midway/Cowboy Church Fire burned 2,412 acres of Walker County land in June 2011. That same month, the Dyer Mill Fire in nearby Grimes County burned 5,280 acres and destroyed 30 homes. In September, the Riley Road Fire in Grimes, Montgomery and Waller counties destroyed almost 19,000 acres and 73 homes.

“Right after Riley Road, everybody got on board,” Jones said. “I love seeing these citizens getting together, getting out there and cleaning up their yards. We’re not doing it for them. This community is empowered to protect their homes and to spread the message that you can help prevent wildfires. It’s a credit to the CWPP working group that they were planning for what could happen long before it did happen. That takes commitment and vision.”

Huntsville Fire Chief Tom Grisham said the Community Wildfire Protection Plan has helped officials guide and prioritize wildfire risk mitigation efforts.

“I’m very proud of our community,” he said. “We work very well together. Our CWPP was the tool that got us heading in the right direction. The plan works, but it takes a commitment from all involved.”

Share your community’s success story and be featured on Texas A&M Forest Service’s Communities in Action web page! Visit <http://texasfirewise.com/> and click on “Protect your community” for more information.

To learn more about how to protect your community from wildfire, contact your local Wildland Urban Interface Specialist by visiting <http://texasfirewise.com/>

Walker County Community Wildfire Protection Plan partners

- City of Huntsville
- Texas A&M AgriLife
- Walker County Judge and commissioners
- Walker County Community Emergency Response Team
- Crabbs Prairie Volunteer Fire Department
- New Waverly Fire Department
- Pine Prairie Volunteer Fire Department
- Bedias Volunteer Fire Department
- Punkin-Evergreen Fire Department
- 356 Volunteer Fire Department
- Riverside Volunteer Fire Department
- Residents and stakeholders
- Texas A&M Forest Service
- U.S. Forest Service

