



GUEST COLUMNIST

Working Together for a Fire-Safe Montana An overview of the Tri-County FireSafe Working Group

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The Tri-County FireSafe Working Group has been working for years to help keep the wildfires down in Montana. The membership includes individual citizens, local government, state and federal agencies, interested contractors, and fire suppression departments. Members come from Lewis & Clark, Jefferson, and Broadwater counties.

Focus on Education

Since its initiation following the North Hill fire of 1984, our group has had the primary mission of fire prevention education. In 2000, it was the recipient of the FEMA "Exemplary Practices" award for its outstanding outreach program. Our program was featured in the 2004 FEMA publication *At Home in the Woods; Lessons Learned in the Wildland/Urban Interface*.

Becoming Proactive

The group undertook a project to map the fuel hazard risk in the interface areas of the counties it represents. When Lewis & Clark County received the Federal Emergency Management Agency "PROJECT IMPACT" grant program, this committee was well suited to be the "fire" committee.

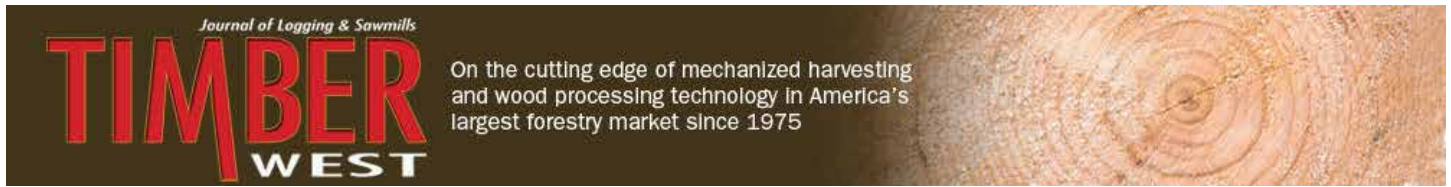
The group found that with the money available for hazard mitigation in general, and with the generous match provided by numerous members and landowners, it was able to step out of the role of talking about fire prevention and mitigation to a very proactive position of wildland fuel hazard reduction projects. The mapping project continues in the three counties, along with the education and awareness programs and fuel hazard reduction in the wildland urban interface.

Success Keeping Fuel Levels Down

With the FEMA Project Impact funding no longer available, the committee has been successful in receiving Hazard Mitigation grants through Montana Disaster and Emergency Services for fuel hazard reduction on City of Helena open space land and private lands in the Wolf Creek, Mont., area.

The group was successful in obtaining National Fire Plan Grants through MT-DNRC in 2001, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2010, and 2012 to develop the program for individual defensible space projects and develop projects for Non-Industrial Private Forest owners.

The Bureau of Land Management is assisting the fuel hazard reduction program with Community Assistance Agreements entered into during the fall of 2003. The agreements were renewed in 2009 and 2012 and are pivotal to our programmatic continuation.



Ongoing Protection

The number, scope, and types of projects continue to grow with available funding opportunities and experience levels of the parties involved. The program continues to provide defensible space around homes in the interface, has undertaken subdivision-wide protection projects, and is expanding into projects with larger tract non-industrial private forest landowners and primary evacuation route fuels mitigation.

The membership voted to change its name to Tri-County FireSafe Working Group in 2007 to recognize the affiliation with the statewide organization FireSafe Montana.

The Group is continuing its work with the local and state Disaster and Emergency Services agencies through the FEMA Pre-Disaster Mitigation Program. The goal is to maintain the interagency flavor and relationships developed over the past years to provide wildland fire mitigation planning, population protection, and meaningful projects to sustain forest health and natural aesthetics in wildland/urban interface settings.

For more information about FireSafe Montana and its activities, log on to www.firesafemt.org.

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