



Success Stories from the Western Region

Whitefish Area Fire Safe Council, Whitefish, Montana

The Whitefish area of Flathead County in northwest Montana has year-round population of about 8,000, and its diverse cultural and recreational amenities and proximity to Glacier National Park attract a large number of seasonal residents and thousands of tourists as well. Much of the land surrounding Whitefish is in public ownership, managed by either the Flathead National Forest (FNF) or the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC).

In 2004, Flathead County began work on a countywide Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP), and sought the input of local fire districts and other stakeholder interests. When the plan was adopted a year later, it identified the East Lakeshore of Whitefish as that community's top priority, followed by Haskill Basin.

Prevailing winds in the Whitefish area blow principally out of the southwest, so wildfires starting to the south and west generally present the greatest threat to the community. Not only do those fires potentially imperil residents to the west of Whitefish (an area which has experienced a great deal of residential growth since 2000), but firebrands and embers from them could potentially spot into the city or across Whitefish Lake to the East Lakeshore. The upper reaches of Haskill Creek contain the city's municipal watershed, its primary water source. In the lower elevations of the Haskill Basin (generally east and south of the city) there has been considerable residential development. Interior roads in the developed areas are primarily gravel, often not well maintained and frequently dead-end or looped. Because of access problems, survivable space around homes and suitably located safety zones were identified in the CWPP as priority action items.

The Elkhorn and Suncrest subdivisions on the west side of Whitefish led the way for other neighborhoods by encouraging their homeowners to be proactive in mitigating the identified fire risk. Northwest Regional Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D), a non-profit serving a three-county area, assisted Elkhorn and Suncrest in securing National Fire Plan funding of cost-shared hazardous fuels reduction projects carried out by individual landowners.

WAFSC Mission Statement:

"Working together to educate and facilitate the Whitefish Community to reduce wildfire risks and to maintain a Fire Safe environment."

Primary Objectives:

- Create and maintain a [Whitefish Community Wildfire Protection Plan](#) (CWPP) to assess and manage the risk that wildfire poses to the community and its watersheds.
- Create, publish, and/or disseminate informational materials related to wildfire preparedness.
- Conduct related informational activities.
- Encourage and participate in the preparation of surveys, studies, plans, and recommendations relative to the coordination of available public and/or private resources to reduce hazardous fuels and other wildfire risks and improve public safety.
- Encourage and facilitate homeowners', homeowners' associations, and others' voluntary participation in developing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating FireSafe programs and activities.
- Cooperate and network with similar FireSafe organizations elsewhere.
- Provide representation from the Whitefish area to FireSafe Montana, a non-profit organization which serves as a bridge between local FireSafe Councils around the state and the regional and national interests and policy makers whose activities affect the successful implementation of those Councils' wildfire mitigation activities.
- Encourage and facilitate private/ public partnerships for specific FireSafe or Firewise projects and activities.
- Help to protect and preserve local watersheds.
- Work and collaborate with local, state, and federal agencies (Whitefish and Big Mountain Fire Departments, DNRC, USFS etc.) on projects of mutual interest.

For more information on the WAFSC visit: <http://www.wafsc.com>

Or write to: wafiresc@gmail.com

To learn about collaboration on the Cohesive Strategy see our Partner Perspectives and Success Stories at: <http://forestsandrangelands.gov>



Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy National Goals; Collective Solutions

Response to Wildfire
Fire Adapted Communities
Resilient Landscapes
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Elkhorn's and Suncrest's work, along with other fuels reduction projects being carried out across northwest Montana by the RC&D, and the community outreach done as part of the Flathead County's CWPP planning process all helped raise public awareness of wildfire issues. In 2007, a number of substantial fires in northwest Montana – including a 30,000 acre blaze just 20 miles west of Whitefish – motivated the entire community to take action. With facilitation assistance from FireSafe Montana, interested stakeholders were invited to participate in the development of a CWPP for the Whitefish area. The response was excellent. Over 50 community members participated actively. Among them were representatives of several homeowners' associations, the chamber of commerce, the water district, city/county sewer district, two timber companies, the electric cooperative, the railroad, the ski area and resort, the convention and visitors bureau, city and county government officials, the RC&D, forestry and fire contractors, FNF and DNRC representatives, individual landowners, and others.

The Whitefish Area Fire Safe Council (WAFSC) was formed to ensure that the community's CWPP (which was completed in 2009) would be implemented. WAFSC developed a list of projects to pursue, which together span all three goals of the Cohesive Strategy. Regular monitoring and reporting to the community was also built into the work program. In 2010, WAFSC reported that it had:

- presented "Firewise" information at the Family Forestry Expo held in nearby Columbia Falls in May 2010;
- co-sponsored a wildfire public education event in June;
- helped the communities/homeowners' associations of Grouse Mountain; Lion Mountain, and Wolftail Pines become officially recognized as "Firewise" Communities by FirewiseUSA (a major step toward WAFSC's goal of creating a network of "Firewise" communities on the west side of Whitefish);
- had inserted nearly 17,000 copies of the educational brochure *Living With Fire* into Flathead County newspapers, thanks to FireSafe Montana's donation of the brochures and a grant from the Whitefish Rural Fire Service Area board to help with distribution costs;
- obtained a \$1,000 grant from the Whitefish Community Foundation to help finance WAFSC's public education activities in 2011;
- presented specially designed Certificates of Appreciation to its public partners for their significant contributions towards advancing community wildfire preparedness in 2010;
- partnered with the RC&D to develop a successful application for DNRC/Forest Service Western States WUI grant funding to conduct fuels mitigation west and south of Whitefish; and
- received \$2,000 for educational activities as part of a DNRC/Forest Service Western Competitive Resource Allocation grant to the RC&D for cost-shared projects on private lands in Haskill Basin aimed at reducing hazardous fuels and/or promoting forest health, protecting soil and water quality, and restoring historic forest conditions.



Photos of 2010 "Don't Burn the Fish" community wildfire awareness event

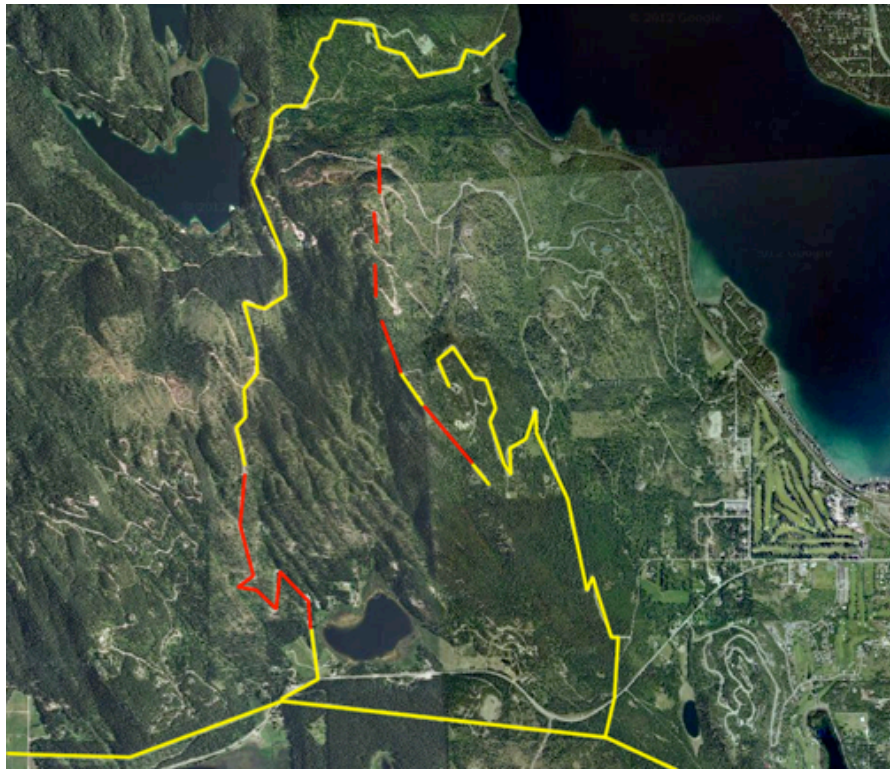


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In 2011, WAFSC sponsored a well-attended Wildfire Awareness luncheon and informational program. A WAFSC member wrote an article for the local newspaper explaining the western spruce budworm and tussock moth infestation the Whitefish area was experiencing and how that insect activity related to forest health. In addition, WAFSC placed ads in four Flathead area newspapers referring the public to the WAFSC website for more information on the subject.

A major focus of WAFSC's activities since its formation has been the creation of continuous shaded fuelbreaks west and southwest of Whitefish. Yellow lines on the map show areas of completed work, and red lines denote areas planned for future implementation. DNRC, the FNF, several homeowners' associations, and numerous private landowners all have participated in the fuelbreak effort.



On its road to success, WAFSC has faced occasional bumps and detours. When Congress eliminated funding of RC&D coordinators nationwide in mid-2011, the board of directors of the northwest Montana RC&D (the grantee for both the Haskill Basin and Whitefish west side fuels projects) decided to disband their organization. DNRC solicited proposals from other non-profits interested in filling the administrative gap, but it was not until December that the Whitefish grants were transferred to the Flathead Economic Policy Center. In the interim, some project momentum inevitably was lost, but work now appears to be back on track. The national economic downturn and a depressed market for wood products, however, have had a negative impact on some landowners' ability to undertake fuels reduction and/or forest health projects which have a 50% match requirement, and WAFSC has been aggressively seeking in-kind match contributions that can be used to make up for any shortfalls. Given the group's past performance, the likelihood that they will achieve their goal is excellent.