



Success Stories from the Western Region

“Living on the Edge” The Prescott Wildland Urban Interface Commission

The Setting Prescott, Arizona, is a city of nearly 40,000, surrounded on three sides by the Prescott National Forest. At an altitude of 5,400 feet, the city has a four-season climate, but with relatively mild winters. The area is an attractive retirement location, and its many amenities draw thousands of outdoor recreationists and other vacationers to the area, swelling its population during the summer fire season. Community growth patterns have resulted in an extensive wildland urban interface (WUI) area, with Ponderosa pine, juniper, and manzanita as the predominant vegetation.

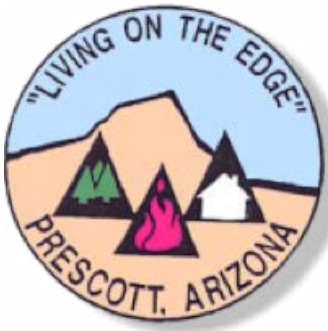
The Challenge The Prescott Wildland Urban Interface Commission traces its history back to an 1983 wild-fire during which the responding agencies – the Prescott Fire Department, the Central Yavapai County Fire District, and the Prescott National Forest – arrived on the scene but found that the incompatibility of their fire hoses rendered them unable to function as a single unit and make the most efficient use of their available resources. Subsequently, the agencies initiated what became the Prescott Basin Wildland Fire and Emergency Management Operations Group, addressing not only equipment standardization and improved communication, but also joint field training.

In 1989, Operations Group leaders recognized that the participation of community leaders, homeowners, and other private sector interests would be essential to addressing the prevention and response issues resulting from the continued expansion of Prescott neighborhoods into the WUI. At a subsequent meeting with the supervisor of the Prescott National Forest, the chairman of the Yavapai County Board of Supervisors, and the mayor and city manager of the City of Prescott it was agreed that that idea should be pursued.

The Response The resulting Interagency Fire and Emergency Management (IFEMG) group – with representatives from the Prescott National Forest, the Central Yavapai Fire District, Yavapai County, the City of Prescott, and the Arizona State Land Department – organized “Living on the Edge...the Challenge of Wildland Development in the Prescott Area,” a conference held in March, 1990. The response was overwhelmingly positive, and five months later the newly created Prescott Area Wildland/Urban Interface Commission (PAWUIC) signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the governments represented on the IFEMG, becoming officially a “chartered group of citizens and agency representatives given the expressed task of identifying, prioritizing and guiding the management of wildland/urban interface issues in the Prescott area. ...Only through a cooperative effort among these entities and with the citizens of these communities can the multi-faceted challenges posed by the development of the wildland areas in the Prescott basin be addressed.”

PAWUIC adopted “Living on the Edge” as its motto because it “has two meanings: living on the edge of Arizona’s wildlands with all of their attendant grace and beauty, but also living with the danger of wildfire.”

PAWUIC’s Progress The PAWUIC officers and members began to organize immediately, and in November, 1990, they adopted a “Structure/Policies/Procedures” document. By December, the first draft of the Inter-agency Emergency Management Plan was completed, and by April a final draft was approved.



According to PAWUIC's official history, "a small group of dedicated residents and agency members worked with remarkable determination and commitment to convey to the public the challenges of living with wildfire dangers in the wildland/urban interface. Generally there would be fewer than 10 people at the monthly PAWUIC meetings and the checking account would contain less than \$100. Funding was a constant challenge and it usually came from what the supporting agencies could squeeze from their budgets along with small individual donations. Communication within the community was a major focus using presentations to a wide variety of organizations, publishing brochures, submitting articles to the newspaper, attending conferences to present the PAWUIC story and openly supporting efforts within city and county government whenever appropriate."

Their efforts soon attracted attention, not only at home, but in the national arena. In 1992, the Prescott Fire Department on behalf of the PAWUIC and its co-operators was selected for the Western Fire Chiefs Association's "Award of Distinction for Fire Service Excellence", which cited the Prescott effort as "innovative, pro-active and a model for other jurisdictions to follow", and commended all of the agencies for their cooperation and progress in reducing the risks of wildfire in the area.

Progress was slow at first, but by the late 1990's the success of PAWUIC's work was becoming evident. A 1999 PAWUIC Town Hall meeting called to address weather forecasting and fire danger attracted over 200 residents. The Forest Service signed a special use permit for a local sand and gravel pit on its land to be established as a location for property owners to take cut brush material to be burned. The amount of material being generated in fuels reduction efforts in the area was significant, but the high costs of taking it to the county landfill were viewed as burdensome by residents. PAWUIC negotiated discounted fees at the county site, which also instituted "free" dump days twice a year.

Since then, PAWUIC has posted a remarkable tally of accomplishments, particularly notable since it remains an all-volunteer organization. Among its achievements:

- Firewise Communities/USA selected Prescott as one of seven communities in the United States to participate in their program for reducing the threat of wildfire. Subsequently the TimberRidge subdivision became the first designated Firewise /USA site in the country. Since then over 80% of TimberRidge properties have met and maintained Firewise standards.
- PAWUIC received a 2002 Western Wildland Urban Interface Grant for \$168,000 (to be matched 50/50 locally), and used it to establish a Prescott Fire Department fuels management crew assigned to work on the creation of defensible space in the community. For this and several subsequent fuels reduction grants, the homeowner's 50% share has been built into the Prescott Fire Department's and Yavapai Fire District's annual budgets, making the program free to landowners willing to create defensible space around their homes.
- A grant agreement between the Prescott National Forest and PAWUIC funded a Community Development and Fire Protection Plan.
- A website was created to provide information about PAWUIC and also be a source for emergency information, and the Prescott Courier agreed to print the website's address every day on its front page.



- PAWUIC became one of the sponsors of a Statewide Wildland Fire Academy.
- Starting with an initial FEMA grant for \$16,000 that enabled the purchase of its first commercial scale brush chipper, PAWUIC has added additional chippers as its work expanded, and recently it purchased a \$500,000 commercial grinder and donated it to the county, through which it will be made available to communities through the area.



After the 2002 Indian Fire erupted two miles southwest of downtown Prescott area fire departments were inundated with calls for assistance to reduce the fire danger; and at least 800 residents attended the PAWUIC Town Hall meeting on June 27. That year more than 500 homes were treated to create defensible space. Among the new ideas PAWUIC considered was the installation of road signs encouraging people to mitigate the hazardous fuels on their property. With donations from State Farm Insurance and county participation, sign production and installation began.

A Forest Service Community Wildfire Protection Plan Grant for \$15,000 (with an 80/20 match) enabled PAWUIC to take a lead role in the development of a local Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) for all affected communities surrounding the Prescott Basin. The resulting plan covered 100 communities/neighborhoods/camps and more than 960,000 acres with an assessed value over \$6.6 billion.

Meanwhile the City of Prescott took complementary action, passing new fire codes and building ordinances, hiring a four-person Wildland Fire Division and 12-person brush crew, and developing a Vegetation Management Plan with a three zone approach for defensible space: 1-10 feet from structures; 10-30 feet; and 30-150 feet. The City and County also created a Hazardous Tree Removal Program.

Going Forward PAWUIC members from the Prescott National Forest, Bureau of Land Management, Arizona Forestry Division, Prescott Yavapai Tribe, Yavapai County Emergency Management, Central Yavapai Fire District, Prescott Fire Department, eleven other smaller fire departments, homeowner associations and private citizens meet monthly to report and coordinate their activities to reduce the wildfire danger in the area. PAWUIC works not just in fire season, but throughout the year. Over the past two decades PAWUIC has brought nearly \$6,000,000 into the area for fire mitigation.

In 2010 it received a \$1.09 million American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) grant to carry out the Drake Biomass project, “a multi-party collaborative effort to promote business development and enable jobs creation in central Arizona through the economical harvesting, processing, and delivery of pinyon-juniper and chaparral vegetation products along with pine slash to the Drake Cement plant – providing an alternate fuel source to offset burning of coal in the manufacture of cement.”¹

A major focus now is achieving Firewise Community/USA status for more Prescott-area subdivisions and communities.

Through the efforts of PAWUIC, its partners, and participating landowners, those “living on the edge” in the Prescott Basin have become not only more Firewise, but also more fire-adapted, and are well on their way to meeting that goal of the Cohesive Strategy.

For further information: <http://www.pawuic.org/>

¹Recovery.gov, Track the Money, Grants – Award Summary, State Forester, Arizona Office of the, last accessed 10/28/12 at:

<http://www.recovery.gov/Transparency/RecipientReportedData/pages/RecipientProjectSummary508.aspx-?AwardID-SUR=89853&qtr=2012Q2>

