



## **Success Stories from the Western Region**

### **Fire Safe Montana: The Community “Staff Ride” – Providing Motivation for Wildfire Preparedness**

One of the three goals of the Cohesive Strategy is Fire-adapted Communities – communities in which “human populations and infrastructure can withstand a wildfire without loss of life and property”. Since its formation in 2006, FireSafe Montana (FSM), a private non-profit organization, has maintained an active program of outreach and education, much of it designed to raise public awareness of wildfire risk and to encourage communities and individual landowners to develop strategies for dealing with that risk. FSM also has fostered the creation of local FireSafe councils around the state, and they usually take a leadership role in local planning and mitigation efforts. Wildfire awareness has increased significantly, but motivating individuals and communities to take the next step – to put their mitigation plans into action – can still be a formidable challenge.

FSM’s 2010 “Communities and Wildfire Conference” focused on that issue, with numerous presentations building on the conference theme “Wildfire Preparedness: It’s Your Responsibility.” At the FSM board of directors’ meeting held in conjunction with the conference, out-going director Bob Mutch asked for time on the agenda to present a project proposal. Bob is well known and highly respected in the fire community for his work in forest fire research and fire management. Retired in 1994 after nearly 40 years with the U.S. Forest Service, he now does fire management consulting around the world. A member of the board of the Painted Rocks Fire District, Bob is also a founding member and chair of the Painted Rocks-West Fork FireSafe Council, which serves a remote area of western Montana that has experienced considerable fire activity in recent years.

Bob asked the FSM board if the organization would be willing to help the Painted Rocks-West Fork FireSafe Council and the Painted Rocks Fire and Rescue Company try a new means of motivating community residents to take the actions necessary to ensure that they, their families, homes, and property could safely withstand a wildfire. The unique approach envisioned was to conduct a “staff ride” for the community.

Staff rides have been used by the military since the late 1800’s as a means of learning from the past in order to be more successful in the future. Participants study an historic battle, then tour the site where it was fought to see how events actually played out on the ground, and finally discuss their observations at length. What worked? What didn’t? Why? How might different field conditions or tactics have altered the outcome? The object is not to find fault or fix blame, but to learn from others’ experiences.

As a fire researcher, Bob has been on the scene of many severe fires, but he was particularly moved by a 2003 tragedy that occurred during the Paradise Fire near Valley Center, CA, an event that he studied in depth while preparing a 2007 report for the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center. In that incident, a 16-year-old girl, Ashleigh Roach, perished, and her 20 year-old sister, Allyson suffered second and third degree burns over 86 percent of her body as they and other family members tried to escape the wildfire and reach the safety of their local fire station, only 600 yards – one-third of a mile – away.

How could that happen? What lessons could be learned? And perhaps most importantly, could the thoughts and emotions that would be generated through a staff ride that re-enacted the Roach family's experience in California somehow motivate better preparedness in Montana? That was the question Bob asked FSM to help Painted Rocks answer.

FSM's board enthusiastically embraced the staff ride project and committed funds for capturing the event on video so that the experience could be shared with anyone who was not able to attend in person. With additional financial support from the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center, and the Wolf Creek-Craig Fire Department, and with the kind cooperation of the Roach family, the project got underway. Ian Marquand, a 30-year veteran of Montana television news reporting and the recipient of numerous state and national journalism awards, was engaged to help produce and direct the video and to narrate it.



*Ashleigh Roach*

Photo credit: The House of Ireland,  
irish-cottage.net

On August 7, 2010, four groups of ten participants each, most of them residents of the Painted Rocks or West Fork Fire Districts, slowly walked one-third of a mile along a narrow two-lane road from a local resident's home to the Painted Rocks Fire Station. Along the way, they stopped four times. At the first stop (or "stand"), a member of the Fire District, in the role of John Roach (Ashleigh's father) set the stage, telling how in mere minutes a clear, bright autumn morning turned into a nightmare of smoke, fire, and noise; their house caught fire; and the family and visiting friends ran for their several vehicles to try to outrun the fire and reach the safety of Fire Station 73.

At the following stops, other District members told the other Roach family members' stories – how Allyson got to her truck but found she didn't have her keys with her, so instead started up the driveway on foot, through the flames. How her brother Jason and sister Ashleigh, who were both in Jason's car, saw and stopped for her, and in so doing became separated from the rest of the family when their father and mother drove right by them, unable to see their children through the now-blinding smoke. How, in sight of Station 73, Jason's car was forced off the road by another vehicle racing out of an intersecting road. And, finally, how Jason shouted at Allyson and Ashleigh to get out of the car and run.

Jason and Allyson made it to the fire station, and from there, by ambulance, to the hospital.





### *Walking the one-third of a mile*

Photo credit: FireSafe Montana

As staff ride participants neared the Painted Rocks Fire Station, they came to a burned car smoldering in a ditch. There was no presentation at that stand. Everyone was simply asked to stop and remember Ashleigh, who perished, alone, still in the backseat of Jason's car.

The staff ride was a somber, moving event. Many participants wept as the Roaches' story unfolded along the one-third of a mile walk. A facilitated discussion of the experience and the participants' thoughts on what they had seen and heard followed, but that was not videotaped.

After lunch, there were presentations and demonstrations related to planning and mitigation activities that community members might want to carry out on their own properties before the next fire season.

Since the Painted Rocks staff ride, the video, "1/3 Mile to Safety," has been widely distributed in Montana through FSM and local FireSafe councils, and it is also available for viewing on the FSM website and YouTube.

In the spring of 2011 the Wolf Creek-Craig Fire Service Area and the Tri-County FireSafe Working Group held a similar staff ride for the communities they serve, and Allyson Roach (now Roach-Watson) came to share her story with the participants. Afterwards, one attendee said that he had attended previous fire preparedness meetings, but had never been moved to act on the information he





received. Now, however, after hearing the Roach family's story, he was going to go home and begin working with his family immediately to prepare an emergency plan of their own.

On February 17, 2011, the Governor's Office of Community Service and the Montana Commission on Community Service announced that Bob Mutch was a recipient of a ReadyMontana Award, citing his volunteer service as founder of the Painted Rocks-West Fork FireSafe Council, as a leader in Montana in protecting people and homes in the face of wildland fires, and as instrumental in creating the "1/3 Mile to Safety" educational video.

*Bob Mutch, accepting 2011 ReadyMontana Award*

Photo credit: Governor's Office of Community Service, [serve.mt.gov](http://serve.mt.gov)

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To view the video "1/3 Mile to Safety" go to:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=yOURJEEhmzo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yOURJEEhmzo)

For a report on the staff ride held by the Wolf Creek-Craig Fire Service Area and the Tri-County Fire-Safe Working Group see: "Landowners hear from fire survivor", Helena Independent Record, 8/29/11 at: [http://helenair.com/news/article\\_5937f77e-89b0-11e0-816e-001cc4c03286.html](http://helenair.com/news/article_5937f77e-89b0-11e0-816e-001cc4c03286.html)

For more information about the Paradise Fire and resident evacuation problems in Southern California in 2003 see: Mutch, Robert W, *FACES: The Story of the Victims of Southern California's 2003 Siege*, Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center, July 2007, last accessed 9/25/12 at <http://www.wildfire-lessons.net/documents/faces.pdf>

