



2003-04 Firewise/WUI Conference

A few weeks before the 2004 spring fire season, the North Carolina Division of Forest Resources (DFR) introduced North Carolina residents to Firewise during a two-day conference in Winston-Salem. The conference drew more than 300 stakeholders; participants included planners, developers, fire chiefs, and county commissioners, who learned what they can do to prevent wildfires from damaging homes and property in their communities.

“It was very informative,” said James Broadus, chief of Western Carteret Fire and EMS. He said he was amazed to learn during Deputy State Forester Dan Smith’s presentation that each year North Carolina averages more than 5,000 wildfires that burn more than 23,000 acres. “It’s frightening to see the number of wildfires mapped out,” he said, “knowing that North Carolina is one of the fastest growing states, causing more wildland/urban interface problems.”



“Firewise is one component that’s needed to holistically address the wildfire risk,” said Toddi Steelman, who attended the conference and has done extensive research on wildfire as an associate professor in the N.C. State School of Forestry. “But no one place will be effective if they cannot mobilize homeowners, landowners, and local decision-makers who are not traditionally involved in hazard mitigation.”

DFR invited speakers from North Carolina’s two nationally recognized Firewise communities- River Run Plantation and St. James Plantation. Clyde Farnsworth, who coordinates Firewise activities for the 2,000 residents in St. James Plantation, said his community desperately needed Firewise. A 1993 wildfire there burned some 2,000 acres of forestland and continued to burn for three days because of the low humidity, high winds, organic soils, and the light fuels littering the forest around the community. “It made residents realize what a fire could do if it reached into the community,” Farnsworth said. “We clearly had our work cut out for us.”

St. James homeowners used bush-hogs to remove vegetation in vacant lots and created fuel-free space around homes by clearing pine needles and overhanging trees. Many residents also traded their highly flammable cedar siding for a hardy plank variety.

“I think now, we all feel better about our potential to sustain a major wildland fire than we did when we started this about a year ago,” Farnsworth said. After the conference, DFR heard from many communities hoping to become Firewise – as well as two developers who wanted to build brand-new communities from the ground up as Firewise communities, and one county that was interested in piloting Firewise ordinances.

“I think people got a lot out of the Firewise Conference and are more aware of the wildfire danger that exists in North Carolina,” said Robin Carter, North Carolina Firewise Coordinator. “But in order for this program to really work, North Carolina residents have to be vigilant in how they prepare their homes for wildfire, and it is our jobs as community leaders to help educate homeowners on how to do that. In this state, it’s not ‘if’ we’ll have a major wildfire, it’s ‘when’ we’ll have a major fire.”

For more information contact:

Robin Carter, North Carolina DFR (919)733-2162 x262 robin.carter@ncmail.net