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Fire Prevention in the Rural/Urban Interface: Washington's Backyard Forest Stewardship/Wildfire Safety Program

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Fire Prevention in the Rural/Urban Interface: Washington's Backyard Forest Stewardship/Wildfire Safety Program

Abstract

In the state of Washington, there is a combination of aggressive and innovative technical assistance and educational programs to promote sound management practices in rural/urban interface forests. The Backyard Forest Stewardship/Wildfire Safety Program integrates a variety of available information to provide rural/urban landowners with the tools necessary to protect their property, while still allowing them to meet many of their forest management objectives. The program helps landowners better manage their properties by promoting fire safety, the protection of water resources, and improvements to wildlife and fish habitat.

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Introduction

Like most forested states in the U.S., Washington faces the increasing challenge of providing forest fire prevention and protection as more people move into the urban/rural interface, while mitigating the impacts of growth on forest resources. Washington is the smallest state in the western U.S., and it has a rapidly growing population. Companies like Boeing, Microsoft, Real Networks, and Immunex fuel population growth. The high tech boom is raising real incomes and the price of property, accelerating the expansion of development and fragmentation of forests. More people are moving into rural areas, putting pressure on adjacent municipal resources and increasing forest fire hazard. The combination of years of fire suppression and changes in forest management practices has resulted in a dangerous build up of fuels, establishing forest wildfires as the major threat to lives and property in the urban/rural interface.

Conventional techniques used to reach non-industrial forest (NIPF) landowners have been ineffective in reaching homeowners in the urban/rural interface. The potential audience is large, and traditional approaches such as Extension classes, workshops, and one-on-one site visits cannot meet the demands of folks in these areas.

The Washington Backyard Forest Stewardship/Wildfire Safety Program

In Washington, there is a combination of aggressive and innovative technical assistance and educational programs to promote sound management practices in rural/urban interface forests. Central to this is a collaborative partnership between the Washington Department of Natural

Resources and Washington State University Cooperative Extension, the U.S. Forest Service State and Private Division, and other state and federal agencies and organizations.

The Backyard Forest Stewardship/Wildfire Safety Program was developed to target people who own between 10 trees and 10 acres of trees in the urban/rural interface, but is applicable to anyone who owns a home in a wooded environment, regardless of acreage or geographic location. The program helps landowners better manage their properties by promoting fire safety, the protection of water resources, and improvements to wildlife and fish habitat.

Landowners living in the urban/rural interface have diverse interests and unique concerns. Often, the pursuit of information requires they contact multiple agencies to obtain multiple publications, resulting in conflicting and confusing messages. The Backyard Forest Stewardship/Wildfire Safety Program integrates many topics and provides landowners with the tools to fire-safe their property while allowing them to meet their forest management objectives.

The topics discussed in this program are:

- Wildfire prevention and wildfire preparedness,
- Forest health,
- Caring for shade and ornamental trees,
- Planting, thinning, and pruning forest trees,
- Safe debris burning (and alternatives to burning),
- Hazard tree management,
- Fish and wildlife habitat improvement, and
- Water quality.

In contrast to most traditional agency or Extension publications, the program uses an illustrated poster with a bulleted text format to convey key concepts quickly and simply. The information is deliberately brief and "to-the-point," with emphasis on the practical "do's and don'ts", and "how to's" that landowners often request. The kit provides additional sources (e.g., Extension bulletins, Master Gardeners, consulting foresters, etc.) when there is a desire for more in-depth information or assistance. Because of the different forest types in Washington State, two versions of the kit are available--one version for the cool and wet forests of Western Washington and another for the drier forests of Eastern Washington.

The Backyard Forest Stewardship/Wildfire Safety Kit information is accessible immediately off the Internet and can be downloaded and printed from a home computer (<http://www.wa.gov/dnr/htdocs/rp/stewardship/bfs/>). Hard copies can be ordered as well by calling a toll free number, sending an e-mail request, or by dropping a business reply request card in the nearest mailbox. As of October 2000, over 15,000 kits had been distributed in response to business reply cards and toll-free telephone requests.

Aggressive Promotion

Natural disasters in the news provide a short, but effective window of opportunity in which to market the program. Backyard Stewardship/Wildfire Safety Kits are aggressively advertised during and immediately following major news-making wildfire events using the following approaches:

- Paid TV and radio spots during the peak of wildfire season.
- Cooperative advertising with private sector sponsors (e.g. utility companies, insurance companies, TV stations, etc.).
- Free Backyard Stewardship/Wildfire Safety Kit postage-paid business reply request cards. This simple tool has produced outstanding results. The use of cards as enclosures in utility bill mailings in target areas during fire season has produced exceptional results at nominal cost. Fire districts, resource agencies, and others enclose these cards in newsletters and mailings, and as handouts at public events.
- Direct mail promotional materials sent to prospective clients of the regular Forest Stewardship Program (20,000-30,000 mailings annually).

Feedback and Program Evaluation

Each Backyard Forest Stewardship/Wildfire Safety Kit includes a business reply card on which the landowner can indicate completion of up to 22 desirable activities. Anyone who returns the card indicating completion of at least six of the activities receives recognition as a Backyard Forest Steward. Recognition includes a wall certificate and property decals.

Recipients of the information kit also receive an evaluation form, which allows them to rate the usefulness of each of the kit's components and offer suggestions for improvement. The kit consistently gets high marks from users, including one who, following the largest wildfire in Washington during 2000, wrote: "Bless you for offering this program. We did the recommended activities and it saved our home during the Rocky Hull Fire."

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