

FIRE MITIGATION COMMITTEE REPORT, SEPTEMBER 2009

The North Fork Landowners' Association's Fire Mitigation Committee sponsored a wildfire workshop on July 8, 2009, preceding the summer Inter Local meeting. The workshop focused on the status of federal, state and private wildfire mitigation efforts in the North Fork Valley six years after the Wedge Canyon Fire. Representatives from the Forest Service, the Montana Department of Natural Resources & Conservation, the Northwest Regional Resource Conservation & Development Council (RC&D) and the Fire Mitigation Committee addressed how the landscape has changed since 2003. They also considered what remains to be done to mitigate the risk of wildfire to structures.

Detailed maps showed how public and private efforts complement one another. According to RC&D Community Forester Bill Swope, the collaboration has yielded "phenomenal" results. The maps will be kept in Sondreson Hall.

The workshop served as the North Fork's Firewise Day, thereby satisfying one of the criteria for maintaining our Firewise Community status. Criteria must be met annually. Among other benefits, the Federal Emergency Management Administration gives a Firewise Community priority in consideration for pre-disaster mitigation planning and project grants.

The Fire Mitigation Committee gave awards to three RC&D foresters at the Inter Local meeting. Mike Justus, Bill Swope and Mason Richwine launched and implemented our fire mitigation cost-share program. Since 2004, they have met with approximately 150 North Fork landowners, entered into 99 cost-share agreements and disbursed about \$280,000 in grant funds.

One major, critical piece of work remains to be done, however. The Forest Service has been planning its Red Whale Project for years, in cooperation with other agencies and North Fork landowners. Most recently, it completed consultation with the U.S Fish & Wildlife Service and issued a revised notice of decision. But implementation of Red Whale, including the Red Meadow Drive portion of the project, has been delayed due to anticipated litigation.

The Forest Service still plans to award the contract for the entire Red Whale Project so work can begin in the summer of 2010. A lawsuit could further delay or preclude implementation of its plans. The project calls for about 3200 acres of mechanical thinning and 1000 acres of prescribed burning.

Finally, the Fire Mitigation Committee is revising the North Fork Fire Mitigation and Planning Report in conjunction with the revision of Flathead County's Wildfire Plan.

Molly Shepherd, Chair