

FIREWISE DAY 2018

The NFLA's Fire Mitigation Committee sponsored its annual Firewise Day workshop on July 18, 2018, preceding the Summer Interlocal meeting. About 45 people attended the program.

The principal speaker was Byron Bonney. Mr. Bonney had a long and distinguished career with the Forest Service, including work as a fire behavior analyst. He now serves as a community forester with the Bitterroot Resource Conservation & Development Council, assisting landowners in designing and implementing fuels treatments. Recent fires have tested many of these treatments.

Mr. Bonney observed that the fire environment has changed dramatically over the last several decades. We have entered a warmer, drier period. The snowpack has declined, especially at lower elevations. Earlier run off has led to an earlier dry season, which in turn has prompted an earlier start to the fire season. At the same time, the fuel complex has changed as a result of fire suppression, insects and disease and the expansion of the Wildland Urban Interface or WUI.

According to Mr. Bonney, a 5000 acre fire was a "big deal" from the 1940's to the mid-1980's. With the help of favorable climatic conditions, suppression was highly effective and mega-fires were rare. More incident management teams and agency firefighters were available to "control, contain and confine" wildfires – otherwise known as the 3 "C's."

From the mid-1980's to the present, however, large fires have become increasingly common. Since 1999, the United States has seen 172 mega-fires, each burning more than 100,000 acres. Fire season starts in the late Spring and continues well into Fall. At the same time, there are fewer incident management teams and agency firefighters than in the preceding period. More contract firefighters are on the job, at greater cost. Concurrent incidents compete for limited resources and "fire-borrowing" has become common. Current policy is to protect the highest values, to fight fire at the bottom of the mountain instead of at the top.

Over 7 million acres burned in Montana and over 1200 structures were destroyed from 2000 to 2017. 1.5 million acres burned in 2017 alone. In the US as a whole, 9.5 million acres burned in 2017, more than 7000 structures were lost and over \$2.5 billion in costs were incurred.

Mr. Bonney reminded attendees that 3 factors affect fire behavior: fuels, weather and topography. The only factor that we can influence is fuels. Every acre that is treated makes a difference, both tactically and strategically. The goal is to eliminate ladder fuels and keep fire on the ground, where firefighters can attack and potentially control it.

Recent fires – Roaring Lion in 2016 and Lolo Peak and Sunrise in 2017 – demonstrated the efficacy of treating fuels. Thinning properties upwind enabled firefighters to make a stand, reducing fire intensity and helping to protect properties downwind.

Mr. Bonney emphasized that no matter how much fuels reduction work landowners have accomplished, they must also take the time to Firewise their homes. Most homes burn because embers find receptive fuel beds, for example shake roofs, abutting vegetation, and gutters full of debris. Landowners must be proactive and must understand the potential consequences of their decisions.

The second speaker at the workshop was Lincoln Chute, Flathead County Fire Service Area Manager. He addressed the status of revisions to the county's [Community Wildfire Protection Plan](#) or CWPP. Consultants had prepared previous versions of the plan. The forthcoming version will be written by and for members of the community and will be user-friendly. A number of public meetings will be held to discuss the draft of the plan.

The Fire Mitigation Committee developed a North Fork Wildfire Mitigation and Planning Report in 2004. The report was revised in 2009. Both documents were appended to the county CWPP. In anticipation of further revision of the North Fork plan, Fire Mitigation Committee co-chair Allen Chrisman led attendees through proposed changes in the strategic planning section of the document. The changes prioritize for treatment those inhabited areas of the North Fork that are currently considered to be most at risk from future wildfires. They also assign priority for treatment to properties along major ingress/egress corridors.

Blankenship Fire Department Chief Ed Burlingame spoke about the resources that are available to fight structure fires on the North Fork. The department handles structure fires pursuant to a memorandum of understanding with the county. Along with Three Rivers, it also handles medical emergencies on the North Fork.

Andy Huntsberger, Fire Management Officer for the Flathead Forest's Hungry Horse/Glacier View District, informed workshop attendees that fire danger had been moved to "high" effective July 17. The forecast is for an above-average fire season. They're seeing a drying trend, with scattered lightning. Cyclone and Thoma lookouts will be staffed; 3 fire engines are available.

Finally, Bill Swope introduced Tony Willets, who will work with landowners on behalf of the Flathead Economic Policy Council. The FEPC administers hazardous fuels reduction grants to North Fork landowners. Mr. Swope remarked that there had been a huge demand for the most recent grant monies, which were available to landowners in the northern half of Flathead County. He anticipates that the funds will be exhausted soon. The FEPC expects to apply for more grants in August but it will be 18 months before funding is available. They'll try to help with any critical work on the North Fork but necessarily on a limited basis.

