

GEORGIA FORESTRY
COMMISSION



Community Wildfire Protection Plan

An Action Plan for Wildfire Mitigation and Conservation of Natural Resources

Union County

A Program of the Georgia Forestry Commission
with support from the U.S. Forest Service



The following report is a collaborative effort between various entities. The representatives listed below comprise the core decision-making team responsible for this report and mutually agree on the plan's contents.

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1) OBJECTIVES AND GOALS

The mission of the following report is to set clear priorities for the implementation of wildfire mitigation in Union County. The plan includes prioritized recommendations for the appropriate types and methods of fuel reduction and structure ignitability reduction that will protect this county and its essential infrastructure. Prioritized activities to educate the public are included. It also includes a plan for wildfire suppression. Specifically, the plan includes community-centered actions that will:

- Educate citizens on wildfire, its risks, and ways to protect lives and properties,
- Support fire rescue and suppression entities,
- Focus on collaborative decision-making and citizen participation,
- Develop and implement effective mitigation strategies, and
- Develop and implement effective community ordinances and codes.

This plan should become a working document that is shared by local, state, and federal agencies that will use it to accomplish common goals. An agreed-upon schedule for meeting to review accomplishments, solve problems, and plan for the future should extend beyond the scope of this plan. Without this follow up this plan will have limited value.

2) COUNTY BACKGROUND AND EXISTING SITUATION

Union County is a small rural mountain county in extreme northeast Georgia with a population of over 21,000 (per 2000 census) with an increase of 44.2% in the last decade. Union County was the 10th fastest growing county in Georgia in 1999 with a higher than average number of second homes, retirees, and commuters. Within the boundaries of Union County are the city of Blairsville, and Suches (unincorporated) the highest elevation community in Georgia at 2590' above sea level. Elevations in the county range from a low of 1600' up to 4784' the highest point in Georgia at Brasstown Bald. Union County covers 330 square miles and is ranked 89th of Georgia's 159 counties in size. Of its total 204,736 acres, approximately half (97,843) is National Forest land with 18,273 acres in Wilderness. The population swells significantly in the summer and fall months due to recreational opportunities available and local Festivals and leaf colors. Tourism, depending on outdoor recreation in the nearby National Forests and streams, two State Parks, and Lake Nottely a 4,180 acre TVA lake, and education (North Georgia Technical College) make significant contributions to the economy.

Union County experiences an average of 52 wildfires per year with the average size fire being 2 acres. During the 2007-2008 fire season there were several unusually large fires in adjoining counties that brought the awareness of a wildland fire problem to a forefront. With the increase of homes being built in the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) the Georgia Forestry Commission (GFC), the U.S. Forest Service and the Union County Fire and Rescue Department recognized a need to address the concern of losing lives and property to wildland fires. In the spring and summer of 2009 the Fire Department and the GFC partnered to develop a County Community Wildfire protection Plan (CWPP). The GFC and the Fire Dept. conducted risk assessments using NFPA form 1144 throughout the county. The average risk in the rural sections of the County was determined to be a high hazard with several communities determined as an extreme risk to losses to a wildfire. (See Attachments)

The causes of the high risk were determined to be limited access, steep slopes, and high fuel loading particularly within the "Home Ignition Zone" found near individual homes. Hopefully the partnerships that have been formed during the process of creating this CWPP and community participation in recommended mitigation measures will help lower the risk of wildfire in Union County and result in saving property and perhaps even lives.

The Wildland-Urban Interface

There are many definitions of the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI), however from a fire management perspective it is commonly defined as an area where structures and other human development meet or intermingles with undeveloped wildland or vegetative fuels. As fire is dependent on a certain set of conditions, the National Wildfire Coordinating Group has defined the wildland-urban interface as a set of conditions that exists in or near areas of wildland fuels, regardless of ownership. This set of conditions includes type of vegetation, building construction, accessibility, lot size, topography and other factors such as weather and humidity. When these conditions are present in certain combinations, they make some communities more vulnerable to wildfire damage than others. This “set of conditions” method is perhaps the best way to define wildland-urban interface areas when planning for wildfire prevention, mitigation, and protection activities.

There are three major categories of wildland-urban interface. Depending on the set of conditions present, any of these areas may be at risk from wildfire. A wildfire risk assessment can determine the level of risk.

1. **“Boundary” wildland-urban interface** is characterized by areas of development where homes, especially new subdivisions, press against public and private wildlands, such as private or commercial forest land or public forests or parks. This is the classic type of wildland-urban interface, with a clearly defined boundary between the suburban fringe and the rural countryside.
2. **“Intermix” wildland-urban interface** areas are places where improved property and/or structures are scattered and interspersed in wildland areas. These may be isolated rural homes or an area that is just beginning to go through the transition from rural to urban land use.
3. **“Island” wildland-urban interface**, also called occluded interface, are areas of wildland within predominately urban or suburban areas. As cities or subdivisions grow, islands of undeveloped land may remain, creating remnant forests. Sometimes these remnants exist as parks, or as land that cannot be developed due to site limitations, such as wetlands.
(courtesy *Fire Ecology and Wildfire Mitigation in Florida* 2004)

Union County is typical of a county that is undergoing a rapid transition from an isolated rural county to a highly desirable recreational and retirement destination. It contains mixtures of both boundary and intermix interface.

Wildland Urban Interface Hazards

Firefighters in the wildland urban interface may encounter hazards other than the fire itself, such as hazardous materials, utility lines and poor access.

- **Hazardous Materials**
Common chemicals used around the home may be a direct hazard to firefighters from flammability, explosion potential and/or vapors or off-gassing. Such chemicals include paint, varnish and other flammable liquids; fertilizer; pesticides; cleansers; aerosol cans, fireworks, batteries and ammunition. In addition, some common household products such as plastics may give off very toxic fumes when they burn. Stay OUT of the smoke from burning structures and any unknown sources such as trash piles.
- **Illicit Activities**
Marijuana plantations or drug production labs may be found in wildland urban interface areas. Extremely hazardous materials such as propane tanks and flammable/toxic chemicals may be encountered, as well as booby traps.
- **Propane tanks**
Both large (household size) and small (gas grill size) liquefied propane gas (LPG) tanks can present hazards to firefighters, including explosion. See the "LPG Tank Hazards" discussion for details.
- **Utility lines**
Utility lines may be located above and below ground and may be cut or damaged by tools or equipment. Don't spray water on utility lines or boxes.
- **Septic tanks and fields**
Below-ground structures may not be readily apparent and may not support the weight of engines or other apparatus.

- **New construction materials**
Many new construction materials have comparatively low melting points and may "off-gas" extremely hazardous vapors. Plastic decking materials that resemble wood are becoming more common and may begin softening and losing structural strength at 180° F, though they normally do not sustain combustion once direct flame is removed. However, if they continue to burn they exhibit the characteristics of flammable liquids.
- **Pets and livestock**
Pets and livestock may be left when residents evacuate and will likely be highly stressed, making them more inclined to bite and kick. Firefighters should not put themselves at risk to rescue pets or livestock.
- **Evacuation occurring**
Firefighters may be taking structural protection actions while evacuations of residents are occurring. Be very cautious of people driving erratically. Distraught residents may refuse to leave their property, and firefighters may need to disengage from fighting fire to contact law enforcement officers for assistance. In most jurisdictions firefighters do not have the authority to force evacuations. Firefighters should not put themselves at risk trying to protect someone who will not evacuate!
- **Limited access**
Narrow one-lane roads with no turn-around room, inadequate or poorly maintained bridges and culverts are frequently found in wildland urban interface areas. Access should be sized-up and an evacuation plan for all emergency personnel should be developed.

3) Risk Summary

Following the initial meeting with County officials on March 5, 2009 which set the goal of producing a County Wildfire Protection Plan, assessments were completed on 82 areas of concern. 43 of these areas were recognized as being Communities at Risk by the Southern Fire Risk Assessment. Other areas were assessed due to their recognition as being in proximity to hazardous fuels, access limitations, position on sloping terrain, or other factors which made it evident that they were in an elevated risk situation. 11 communities or areas were classified as being low risk, 57 were classified as moderate, 4 as high, and 10 as extreme. These areas are listed on separate pages in the appendix which lists their name, map number, score, risk category, and location by latitude and longitude. These tables are also available as separate files in the folder for all information in the plan. The original copies of the completed assessments are retained by the Towns-Union office of the Georgia Forestry Commission.

4) Prioritized Mitigation Recommendations

The following recommendations were developed during follow-up meetings with County and State fire response agencies. A priority order was determined based on which mitigation projects would best reduce the hazard of wildland fire to communities and infrastructure. The following priorities were considered.

- Community Hazard and Structural Ignitability Reduction
- Wildland Fuel reduction or modification
- Improvements to capabilities of Wildland response agencies
- Public Education regarding risk of wildland fire

Proposed Community Hazard and Structural Ignitability Reduction Priorities

| <u>Hazard</u> | <u>Mitigation</u> | <u>Method</u> |
|------------------------------------|---|--|
| Lack of defensible space | Improve defensible space around structures in communities at risk | All departments should examine structures in communities at risk in their response areas. Improvements to defensible space as referenced in Firewise guidelines should be conveyed to residents through media or direct contact. |
| Access problems for initial attack | Improve access problems | All County response agencies and the Georgia Forestry Commission should closely examine access in all communities identified to be at risk. When problems are identified corrective measures should be made. |

Proposed Community Hazard and Structural Ignitability Reduction Priorities

| Hazard | Mitigation | Method |
|----------------------------|---|--|
| Structural Ignitability | Reduce structural ignitability | Citizens in communities at risk should be educated regarding methods to reduce structural ignitability as referenced in Firewise guidelines. This can be accomplished through media or direct contact. |
| Local Codes and Ordinances | Improve and amend to codes and ordinances pertaining to infrastructure and community protection from wildland fire. | Examine all existing codes and ordinances for problems regarding direct conflicts to wildland safety or lack of needed codes or enforcement. |

Proposed Wildland Fuel Reduction or modification Priorities

| Hazard | Mitigation | Method |
|--|--------------------------------|---|
| Fuel Hazards near Communities at risk | Prescribed Burning | Determine Communities at risk where Prescribed burning would be appropriate to use. Seek cooperation from adjacent landowners. Find funding to cover cost of burning. Prioritize burn compartments and execute. |
| Fuel Hazard in public or shared spaces | Fuel Modification or reduction | Determine where hazards exist. Determine appropriate method for modification or reduction. Chipping, raking and piling, County pick-up, Organized Community Clean-up days could be beneficial. Organized burning could be conducted on these days supported by local fire department personnel. |

Proposed Improvements to capabilities of Wildland Response Agencies Priorities

| Problem or need | Improvement or solution | Details |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|
| Lack of qualification or training | Provide training opportunities | Examine training records of all wildland responders to insure training and qualifications match expected duties. Insure that all wildland responders have Basic Wildland Certification. Locate and secure funding for enhanced training from state and federal agencies. |
| Equipment needs | Improve or acquire Wildland fire equipment | Determine specific equipment needs to bring all wildland response equipment to NWCG Standards. Provide appropriate PPE to all County wildland responders. Provide wildland hand tools to County departments. Investigate needs for improvements to all wildland water handing and supply (dry hydrants, brush trucks, hose, etc.) |

Proposed Public Education Priorities

| Educational Priority | Responsible party | Method |
|---|---|---|
| Increase public awareness concerning firewise principles and fire prevention through direct contact | Federal, State, County, and municipal governments | Conduct Firewise meetings by each fire response jurisdiction assisted by Georgia Forestry Commission (state) and USDA Forest Service (federal). Conduct a door to door campaign in particularly hazardous communities |
| Increase public awareness concerning firewise principles and fire prevention through use of media | County, State, and municipal governments | Use PSA's in local newspapers and local radio stations. Utilize firewise displays in local post offices and banks. Seek use of local EMC newsletter for firewise message. Create poster sized notices for use in common public places (stores, post offices, etc. adjacent to high hazard areas advising residents about the hazard and how to protect themselves and their property. Distribute public notices concerning firewise at local sporting events and other public gatherings. |

Proposed Public Education Priorities

| Educational Priority | Responsible Party | Method |
|---|---|--|
| Increase public awareness concerning Firewise principles and fire prevention through formal certification and recognition | Federal, State, County, and municipal governments | Supported by the USFS and the Georgia Forestry Commission each local fire station should set a goal of achieving Firewise status for at least one extreme or high risk category community before the end of calendar year 2010. The goal of adding at least one community annually should extend beyond this initial goal. |

5) Action Plan, Timetables, and Assessment Strategy

POTENTIAL FUNDING SOURCES:

As funding is questionable in these times of tight government budgets and economic uncertainty, unconventional means should be identified whereby the need for funding can be reduced or eliminated.

Publications / Brochures –

- FIREWISE materials are available for cost of shipping only at www.firewise.org.
- Another source of mitigation information can be found at www.nfpa.org.
- Access to reduced cost or free of charge copy services should be sought whereby publications can be reproduced.
- Free of charge public meeting areas should be identified where communities could gather to be educated regarding prevention and firewise principles.

Mitigation –

- Community Protection Grant:
 - USFS sponsored prescribed burn program. Communities with at risk properties that lie within 3 miles of the USFS border may apply with the GFC to have their forest land prescribed burned free of charge.
 - FEMA Mitigation Policy MRR-2-08-01: through GEMA - Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) and Pre Disaster Mitigation (PDM)
 - To provide technical and financial assistance to local governments to assist in the implementation of long term cost effective hazard mitigation measures.
 - This policy addresses wildfire mitigation for the purpose of reducing the threat to all-risk structures through creating defensible space, structural protection through the application of ignition resistant construction, and limited hazardous fuels reduction to protect life and property.
 - With a complete and registered plan (addendum to the State plan) counties can apply for pre-mitigation funding. They will also be eligible for HMGP if the county is declared under a wildfire disaster.
 - GFC - Plowing and burning assistance can be provided through the Georgia Forestry Commission as a low cost option for mitigation efforts.
- Individual Homeowners –
- In most cases of structural protection ultimately falls on the responsibility of the community and the homeowner. They will bear the cost; yet they will reap the benefit from properly implemented mitigation efforts.
- GEMA Grant - PDM (See above)

Ultimately it is our goal to help the communities by identifying the communities threatened with a high risk to wildfire and educate those communities on methods to implement on reducing those risks.

5) Action Plan

Steps to implement Community Hazard and Structural Ignitability Priorities

| Hazard | Specific Action and Responsible Party |
|--------------------------|--|
| Lack of Defensible Space | Using the risk summaries referenced in section 3, each department should conduct inspections of communities at risk in their jurisdiction or area of response for lack of defensible space. Findings will be conveyed to residents and treatment methods will be recommended in accordance with Firewise principles. This would probably be best accomplished by approaching homeowners associations or organizations. Ultimately, the message should reach individual homeowners in each community. Should local organizations not exist, the builder or developer could be contacted. Such contacts would also influence future projects or developments |
| Access problems | Using individual Communities at Risk maps for each station, the Georgia Forestry Commission and Union County Fire officials should visit all identified communities at risk for the purpose of locating and resolving access difficulties. This inspection should extend into the wildland adjacent to the communities at risk looking for hindrances to suppression tactics |
| Structural Ignitability | Union County Fire officials should examine structures for structural ignitability concerns at the time when the communities at risk are inspected for lack of defensible space. Using firewise guidelines for reducing structural ignitability, (a checklist could be formulated and used) structures should be assessed and findings conveyed to residents. This could be through use of media or by direct contact with residents or homeowners associations. |
| Codes and Ordinances | Union County and municipal Fire Marshalls should closely examine all codes and ordinances for gaps and oversights which could cause problems in the wildland fire arena. Examples include proximity of propane tanks to structures, accumulations of debris, lack of proper identification pertaining address or street names, set back distances from wildland fuels, road widths in new developments. |

In regard to priority, the above steps should first extend to the higher numbers in the extreme category from the risk summary as these communities are at a higher degree of risk.

5) Action Plan

Steps to implement Fuel Reduction or Modification Priorities

| Hazard | Specific Action and Responsible Party |
|---|--|
| Hazardous Wildland Fuel Accumulations | The Georgia Forestry Commission will prioritize prescribed burning projects adjacent to Communities at risk where burning is determined to be appropriate. Prescribed burn goals set by the U S Forest Service should also take fuel reduction near communities at risk into consideration as part of the prescription. Both agencies should work toward planning to see any proposed burn projects could be done concurrently. This will require changes in how these burns are carried out as regards logistics and technique. |
| Fuel Continuity between Federal Wildland and Woodland Communities | In areas where the need exists and fuel reduction by burning is determined to be inappropriate, permanent or semi-permanent fuel breaks could be established. These breaks should be maintained annually prior to the arrival of prime burning times. Their locations should be mapped and made known to local, state, and federal response personnel. Residents of the Communities adjacent to these breaks should be advised of their purpose and their cooperation in protecting them should be gained. These breaks could be installed by the USDA Forest Service in cooperation with and assisted by the Georgia Forestry Commission. |
| Hazardous Fuel Accumulations in communities and hindrances to suppression | Using the risk summary in section 3, Fire departments could conduct community clean up days in communities at risk in their respective jurisdictions aimed at reducing hazardous fuels and hindrances to suppression in shared community space. Residents would be provided with guidance and access to disposal alternatives for materials removed. This could involve organized burning or use of a chipper. |

Steps to implement improvements to wildland response capability

| Improvement needed | Responsible Party and specific action |
|--|---|
| Improve training and qualification of Union County Wildland firefighters | Chief Ranger Tony Harkins, District Ranger Shawn Alexander of the Georgia Forestry Commission and Union County Fire Chief Charles Worden should examine all training records for personnel under their supervision. All personnel should be certified Georgia Basic Wildland Firefighters or higher in qualification. Additional training and qualification should be sought for personnel identified in the Union County Fire plan who are assigned specific Incident Command System (ICS) functions. Sources for available funds for training should be sought at State and Federal levels. Online training is available for GBWF certification from the Georgia Forestry Commission. |
| Improve or acquire wildland fire fighting equipment | All stations for Union County Fire Departments should inventory their present equipment relating to their wildland capability. Funding sources should be investigated from available grants or other sources. Needs for job specific wildland responses should be examined by Chief Ranger Harkins and Fire Chief Worden. Specific equipment needs include new style fire shelters, rakes, pulaskis, PPE, new slip in units to upgrade engines to type 6 or 7 NWCG standard. |

5) Action Plan

Steps to educate or inform the Public regarding wildland fire prevention and responsibilities

| Opportunity | Responsible Party and Specific Action |
|---|--|
| Improve Public Education through direct contact | Prior to the onset of fire season(s) rangers of the Georgia Forestry Commission and Union County Fire personnel should conduct firewise meetings in conjunction with normally scheduled fire department meetings. People living in or near extreme and high risk communities should be invited to these meetings by use of door to door campaigns or by mailbox flyers. Notices regarding these meetings could be placed in local post offices or stores near communities at risk. A Firewise display should be acquired and utilized at this meeting. This display would be retained by the Union County unit of the Georgia Forestry Commission and used for all Firewise meetings in Union County. Local news media should be invited to these meetings. Goals for potential Firewise certified communities in Union County could be considered after these meetings are completed. |
| Improve Public Education through use of media | Prior to the onset of fire season(s) or during periods of particularly high fire danger use of the media should be stepped up by personnel of the Georgia Forestry Commission. This should include use of all available media in the County. PSA's should be run weekly during periods of high to extreme fire danger. Signs or poster boards could be developed for display in public spaces near communities at risk advising residents that they live in areas that are susceptible to wildland fire and directing them to sources of information regarding wildland fire and their role in improving their own personal safety. Firewise materials aimed at individual homeowners should be provided to the local building permit office for distribution to home builders and developers |
| Improve Public Education through formal certification | Before the end of calendar year 2010 the stations listed below should seek and obtain Firewise certification for the community listed. Should lack of interest or other problems prevent certification of the listed community an effort should be made with another community listed on the Communities at Risk list. |

Station 3 – Helton Creek Vogel Springs

5) Action Plan

Timetables for Actions

Steps to implement Community Hazard and Structural Ignitability Priorities

- Steps to examine communities at risk for defensible space and structural ignitability should take place during the winter of 2009.
- Pre-planning to examine access and suppression problems should take place at any time during the current burning season.
- Codes and Ordinances should be examined as soon as possible in order for the legal workings of changes to take place.

Steps to implement Fuel Reduction or Modification Priorities

- Any identified prescribed burn projects should take place in late winter 2010. Any other priority burn projects or installation of pre suppression fuel breaks should take place during this same window.
- Steps to reduce fuels in communities at risk should coincide with steps to improve defensible space and reduce structural ignitability. Timing of these actions would be dependent upon Fire station availability during the late winter of 2010.

Steps to implement improvements to wildland response capability

- Cooperation between state and local wildland suppression forces regarding improvements to training and equipment should begin immediately.

Steps to educate or inform the Public regarding wildland fire prevention and responsibilities

- Direct contact with residents in Communities at risk should take place as soon as possible during early calendar year 2010
- The use of media should coincide with the above action.
- Certification of Firewise communities should follow the timetable associated with the action plan

5) Action Plan

Assessment of Actions

Reduction of Community hazard and structural ignitability

- Direct measurement of the number of communities assessed would be the appropriate measure of success
- Any meetings that result in cooperation between wildland departments should be logged along with minutes of those meetings. Goals should be set and reviewed after each meeting.
- Any changes to or additions to codes and ordinances would be an obvious measure of success.

Steps to implement Fuel Reduction or Modification Priorities

- Acres burned would be the appropriate measure for fuel reduction. A direct measure of linear feet of firebreaks would be an appropriate measure for pre suppression breaks.
- Fuel reduction in communities at risk would be measured by the number of communities affected and number of projects completed.

Steps to implement improvements to wildland response capability

- A direct measure of the number of capabilities or qualifications gained would be the appropriate measure of success.
- Any equipment acquired or any equipment brought up to national standards would be the appropriate measure of success.

Steps to educate or inform the Public regarding wildland fire prevention and responsibilities

- Direct measurement of the number of persons contacted, literature distributed, public notices posted, news articles published, radio programs aired, etc. would be the best measure of success. The number of communities that achieve Firewise status would be an obvious measure of success.

6) Wildfire Pre-Suppression Plan

This document is located in the appendix of this plan

7) County Base and Hazards Maps

Overview maps of the Initial Dispatch Points with Level of Concern, Surface Fuels, and Fire Occurrence areas are included in the appendix of this plan. As was mentioned in the risk summary, level of concern maps of the communities at risk are also included with the community assessment tables organized by station jurisdiction. These maps along with their respective tables are located in the appendix. These maps are in PDF format and are available from the Georgia Forestry Commission. When viewed in this electronic format increased magnification and resolution and large format printing capabilities are realized which will make these maps more useful.

8) Appendix

- Risk Summary tables with respective tables organized by station
- County maps of surface fuels, Fire Occurrence areas, Level of concern with initial dispatch points, and Level of concern by station jurisdiction
- Union County Pre-Suppression plan.

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