THE FIRE ADAPTED COMMUNITIES CONCEPT
Briefing Paper
NWCG Wildland Urban Interface Mitigation Committee

The challenge: Wildland fires threaten communities, put property owners and firefighters at risk, and cost the nation billions of dollars every year through suppression, structure protection costs, property destruction and economic loss.

The nation has experienced a rapid escalation of severe fire behavior, home and property losses, increased threats to communities, worsening conditions on the land and increasing costs for suppression. Congress, the fire community, and the public recognize a need for a new strategy, a new path forward, and a new way of thinking about wildland fire which reduces dependency on suppression.

Fire adaptation: A fire adapted community is a human community consisting of informed and prepared citizens collaboratively planning and taking action to safely coexist with wildland fire through preparation. It's not a new program to join but instead folds together proven mitigation tools to reduce risk in the larger community – Community Wildfire Protection Plans (or the equivalent), the Ready, Set, Go! program, hazardous fuel treatments and fuel buffers near communities, defensible space programs like Firewise and Living With Fire, safe zones, public and private land management, codes and ordinances where appropriate, fire prevention education and increased local capacity for protection.

How is this different: The fire adapted community strategy:

- brings more stakeholders to the mitigation table
- combines and focuses a variety of proven mitigation tools, funding and effort on risk reduction
- reduces risk on a larger scale

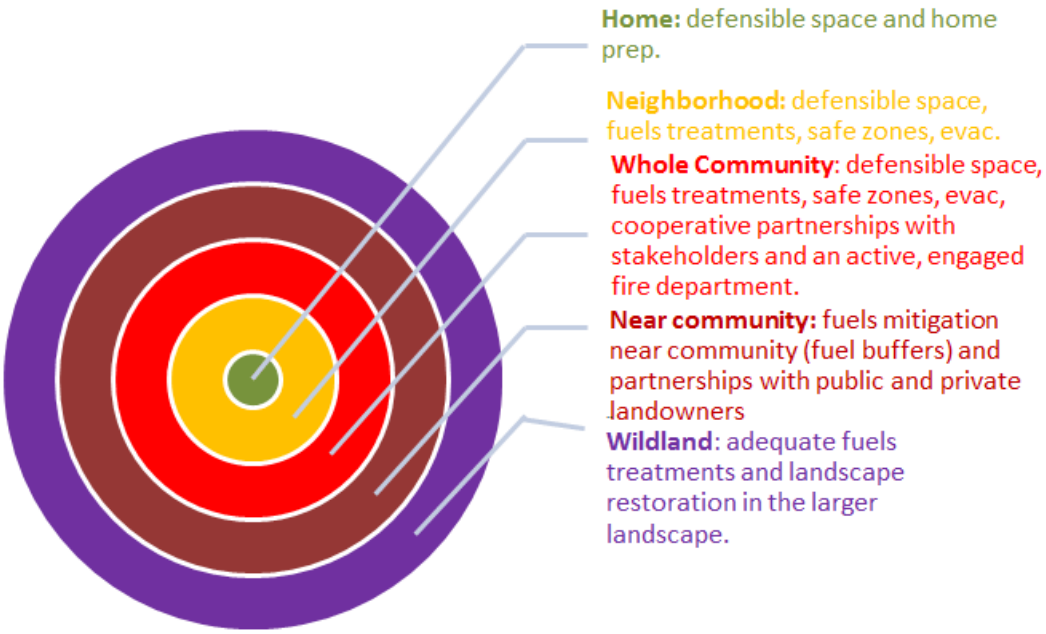
The premise of community fire adaptation is:

- communities ***can*** survive wildland fire by adapting
- communities adapted to wildfire may need less extensive structure protection actions
- a holistic approach to adapting the community reduces risk to a greater extent than a piecemeal effort
- the tools to help communities adapt to fire are available
- the all-lands, all-hands approach shares the burden and the success of mitigation

Role of QFR and Cohesive Strategy: The 2005 and 2009 Quadrennial Fire Review promoted "fire adapted communities rather than escalating protection of communities at risk in the WUI." The National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy (Cohesive Strategy) focuses on three key elements:

- Restoring and maintaining resilient landscapes,
- Integrated and safe response to wildland fire,
- Creating and maintaining fire adapted communities by:
    - Diminishing wildland fire risk to communities through education and action;
    - Getting individuals to accept responsibility and act to prepare their properties for wildland fire;
    - Assessing levels of risk and establishing roles and responsibilities for jurisdictions to mitigate both the threat and the consequences of wildland fire;
    - Developing the fire response capacity sufficient to reduce the risk to the community;
    - Monitoring, collecting, and sharing effective mitigation activities.

Federal and state agencies provide the tools to help communities prepare before a fire starts but it is up to local jurisdictions and residents to take the initiative to prepare for wildland fire. This requires a change in the public's expectation of wildland fire response and an understanding that fire authorities often cannot provide protection for every structure affected during a wildland fire; and understands that it is dangerous for firefighters to attempt to protect a structure where owners have neglected appropriate measures to make it defensible.



Local role: A fire adapted community's residents understand the limits of response capability and collaboratively take action to safely coexist with wildland fire threat. A community which has adapted to wildland fire has, or is striving to achieve, the following characteristics:

- Adequate local fire suppression capacity to meet most community protection needs.
- Structures and landscaping designed, constructed, retrofitted, and maintained in an ignition resistant manner.
- Local codes and covenants (building, planning, zoning, and fire prevention codes) require ignition-resistant home design and building materials.

- Fuel treatments near the community are properly spaced, sequenced, and maintained across the landscape to limit a fire's ability to rapidly spread while increasing the safety and effectiveness of fire suppression operations.
- A community wildland fire protection plan (e.g. a Community Wildfire Protection Plan, a Wildland Fire Prevention Plan, or Hazard Mitigation Plan) is developed, implemented, and regularly updated.
- Other safety features are "built" into the community such as buffers between fuels and the community, designated evacuation routes, and safe zones in the community.

The desired result of fire adapted communities is:

- reduced risk to communities and firefighters,
- reduced damage to homes, infrastructure and cultural resources,
- reduced negative economic, ecological and social impacts,
- reduced suppression costs in the wildland urban interface (WUI).

Collateral benefits are that communities who understand their role and the role of wildland fire on the larger landscape are more likely to understand and support hazardous fuels reduction projects and fire management decisions should a wildland fire impact them.

> "...supporting the development of fire adapted communities is vital to successful wildland fire management in the wildland urban interface." *FS Chief Tom Tidwell.*

Wildland fire management is a year-round process inclusive of fuels treatments and WUI mitigation efforts which play a significant role in reducing fire severity and damage, and ultimately costs. The goal of creating fire adapted communities is to enable communities to create their own fire resilient environment, lessening the need for protection, which will reduce risk to residents, firefighters, property, and infrastructure and free up resources for suppression and landscape restoration.

IN CONCLUSION

Helping communities adapt to living safely with wildland fire on the larger landscape is an effective way to enhance public participation in wildland fire issues on private property in the WUI. Research has shown that people who know the risks and consequences of wildland fire and understand how they can reduce their risks are more likely to take action than those who don't. It is important to inform the public in high risk communities about they can mitigate the wildland fire risk, provide resources to initiate community protection and planning, and integrate the individual and community effort with the state and federal effort to this end, a fire adapted community will enhance abilities to protect human life, reduce property and economic damage, and reduce costs when a wildland fire threatens.

CWPPs
Defensible space and resilient structures -- *Firewise* principles
Public/responder awareness and preparedness -- *Ready, Set, Go!*
Safe evacuation routes or internal safe zones
Fuels management near communities -- fuels buffer
local agreements
Prevention education
codes and ordinances
Fire Adapted Communities
Local capacity