



FIRE ADAPTED COMMUNITIES LEARNING NETWORK

Notes from the Field

Fire Departments Conduct FAC Learning Exchange Austin, Texas and Boise, Idaho Share Means of Meeting Their Similar Challenges

February 2015

Members of the Austin and Boise Fire Departments met in Austin during the first week of February to exchange knowledge and best practices that will help their communities become more resilient to inevitable wildfires. The idea for the exchange originated at the 2014 Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network annual workshop, when network members from the two cities recognized that they shared similar challenges.

On August 25, 2008, Boise had a tragic wildfire that left one person dead and 10 homes lost. It prompted the City of Boise to update building codes for wildland-urban interface areas and develop an interdepartmental Wildfire Mitigation Team. In 2011 Travis County, Texas—which includes Austin—had its worst wildfire season on record, with more than 100 homes lost. That was a wake-up call for both the community and first responders, and it prompted the Austin Fire Department to create a Wildland Fire Division. Both departments and communities have made progress in the years since then—but realized that by learning from each other, they can do even better.

The Agenda

The first day of the exchange was spent in the field exploring and discussing a mechanical fuel reduction project in the Balcones Canyonlands Refuge adjacent to

Key Learning Questions Set for the Exchange

- **What is the best approach to right-size resources to align with wildfire danger?**
- **What are some best practices related to transitioning from a structural protection fire department to an all-hazards (including wildfire) department?**
- **What are some best practices related to pre-planning for incidents in the wildland-urban interface?**
- **What are some best practices and lessons learned with wildfire mitigation and public outreach?**

homes. The group also heard from the Jester neighborhood's Firewise coordinator to get a homeowner's perspective on how fire departments can help at-risk neighborhoods learn to live with fire. In the afternoon the group visited the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center and discussed research on prescribed fire effects, media outreach and more.

A series of presentations on the second day provided a good opportunity to introduce additional members of the Austin department to the Boise delegates. The third day started with a visit to the Wildland Fire Division's base camp and continued with a series of meetings at the Office of Emergency Management, including attending a regular

meeting of the Austin Travis County Wildfire Coalition. The final day was dedicated to an after action review and planning for future joint activities.



Fire adapted communities learning exchange participants view map showing treatments conducted in the vicinity of the Jester Estates Firewise Community. Photo: TNC/Wendy Fulks

Profiles of the Fire Departments

	Travis County, Texas	Ada County, Idaho
Full-time firefighters	1,100	600+
Fire stations	45	29
Population	885,400 in Austin 1,024,331 Travis County	225,000 in Boise 450,000 Ada County
Percentage of department with wildland training (S130/190)	100%	100%
WUI acres	284,832	About 35,000 acres in the Boise WUI and 1.5 million acres countywide
Homes in WUI	398,430	About 6,500 homes in the Boise WUI and 16,000 countywide
Land ownership	Mainly private	Private, city and federal
Primary vegetation types	Oak juniper woodlands, dry climate grasses, juniper woodlands, aggraded juniper woodlands	Sage-steppe invaded by cheatgrass and other species; juniper is a concern in places.
Primary fuels reduction techniques	Mechanical, some prescribed fire	Goat grazing, mechanical, herbicide
Threatened / endangered species affected by fire management	23 total with primary being golden-cheeked warbler and black-capped vireo, karst invertebrates	Mulford's milkvetch, Aase's onion and slickspot peppergrass
Watershed concerns related to fire	Yes	Yes
Threats to ecosystem health	Oakwilt, drought	Invasive plant species such as cheatgrass, medusahead rye, rush skeletonweed and hoary cress (whitetop)

Themes that Emerged from the Exchange

Unique Role and Challenges for Fire Departments

As the wildland-urban interface (WUI) grows, more municipal fire departments are facing serious wildland fire challenges, which raise new issues and require new ways of working.

Unlike structural fires, which are fairly static, wildfires are dynamic and often cross jurisdictions. Therefore, preparing for, responding to, and recovering from them requires a great deal of interagency collaboration. The necessary degree of cooperation and integration can be a

challenge for some firefighters and departments. It's not uncommon for departments to have become somewhat insular, for example, hiring only from within. This can hinder or slow the adoption of new approaches, making it difficult to effect the type of cultural change that is needed to address wildland fire issues.

Multi-scalar collaboration is not easy; however, it can reap many benefits. For example, participants noted that having multiple partners involved in projects strengthens public outreach efforts and lends them more credibility. One participant said, "our voice is louder together."

To meet the challenges, participants recommended departments:

- Improve internal collaboration;
- Recognize that firefighter unions are stakeholders, and engage them early in the change process;
- Conduct wildland fire training that includes multiple divisions, including operations;
- Seek input from operations personnel when identifying and prioritizing wildfire mitigation projects;
- Promote the benefits of cross-training; and
- Ensure that all partners use the same messages when communicating with the public.



A shaded fuel break is being created by the Austin Fire Department adjacent to Jester Estates. Participants toured this work as part of the exchange.



Photo: TNC/Wendy Fulks

Community Planning

Exchange participants also talked about evacuation planning and the need to let residents know that, depending on conditions such as fire start location, wind speed, traffic and poor road infrastructure, they might not be able to evacuate in case of wildfire. This is one reason creating defensible or survivable space is so important.

Austin and Travis County recently completed a community wildfire protection plan and, due to serious traffic concerns, the top priority was to improve wildfire evacuation planning. As a result, the fire department has collected information on traffic patterns and expected fire behavior to create a draft map of “drivesheds,” that will indicate the best evacuation routes for citizens in the different parts of the county. They are also in the process of identifying potential safety zones within the county, including schools, businesses and churches. The public will have a chance to learn about this effort on National Wildfire Preparedness Day on May 2, 2015.

Mapping out alternative evacuation routes is part of a larger pre-planning need that many WUI communities have. In Boise, the operations chief



The group discussed evacuation planning, communications technology and inter-agency coordination at the Travis County Office of Emergency Management. Photo: TNC/Wendy Fulks

meets with battalion chiefs regularly to conduct pre-planning exercises for WUI fires. This is a way for incident commanders to analyze multiple scenarios in different parts of the county, and is intended to speed up decision-making when serious fires occur.

Fire departments can play a vital role in helping communities live with fire. They are respected as experts by homeowners and land managers alike, and can help the two groups take coordinated action in a given area. Outreach to homeowners and land managers is a high priority for both Austin and Boise. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is a major land manager in Ada County and a key partner for the Boise Fire Department—the Boise delegation, in fact, included a BLM mitigation and education specialist.

Controlled Burning

Although most of their fuel treatments are mechanical, the Austin Fire Department does regularly conduct small prescribed fires to reduce fuels. The Boise Fire Department wanted to learn more about these prescribed fire efforts because they are interested in burning near riparian areas—light, flashy fuels and topography prevent using prescribed fire in most of the Ada County WUI. As participants toured the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center they

were able to discuss burning in the WUI, as well as share information about fire training, monitoring, and working with the media to deliver messages about good fire.

Take-away messages from these conversations included:

- In some cases, especially next to houses, you might only be able to make incremental progress when using fire and mechanical treatments to restore habitat.
- Land owners/managers have a responsibility to reduce fuels in areas that could pose a wildfire threat to homes.
- Cross-boundary burning can save time and resources, but if organizations don’t use the same fire qualifications and training standards, it’s hard to work together.
- Leveraging the media to deliver messages about the benefits of controlled burning requires a significant amount of capacity—but the benefits can be tremendous.

Participants returned home with fresh ideas and perspectives—and look forward to continuing sharing knowledge with colleagues at FAC events and through personal contacts for years to come.



Several exchange participants were interviewed as part of a video project. Photo: TNC/J. Bailey

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