FIRE ADAPTED COMMUNITIES LEARNING NETWORK

A quick guide for community leaders

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Promoting Fire Adapted Communities through Property Assessments: Summary

As the magnitude and severity of wildfire risks increase, so too does the need to describe and mitigate hazards. At the community scale, that process is reliant in large part on property assessments that evaluate vulnerabilities and outline mitigation strategies. This may seem a simple task, but in reality, the slew of property assessment tools, data structures and training methods can be overwhelming, and coordination of an effective and efficient assessment program requires thoughtful planning and a clear understanding of the range of possibilities. This set of quick guides will provide examples of assessment programs in fire adapted communities throughout the country, and it will highlight the spectrum of available assessment tools; outline various models of data collection, organization and use; and point to a range of training models and opportunities.

A defensible space inspector discusses the removal of dead and dying vegetation with a homeowner. Photo by Tahoe Douglas Fire Protection District

Key points

- When designing an assessment program, consider how data will be used and at what scale they are most needed.
- Assessment programs tend to be qualitative or quantitative, falling along spectrums of detail, technology and cost.

Approaching hazard assessment

When approaching hazard assessment, it is important to reflect on a few basic questions: How will assessment data be used? At what scale are assessment data most needed? Is homeowner education a key goal of your program? These questions will help inform the scope and design of the program, which can vary significantly depending on the needs of the community in question.

On a cursory level, assessment strategies can be broken down into two categories: qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative assessments tend to be prescriptive in nature, focusing on actions a homeowner or neighborhood can take to increase fire safety. In these cases, data may be collected during a home visit, but data collection is not the focus of the assessment—risk mitigation is the focus. Quantitative assessments have a more comparative focus, often assigning scores to homes or properties based on targeted data that is collected either through home visits or remotely through existing datasets. Those scores can then be used by fire planners to evaluate trends at a landscape scale, or for homeowners to attain fire safe certifications and/or secure fire insurance.

In many communities, an effective program will involve some combination of qualitative and quantitative assessments, falling along broad spectrums of detail, technology and cost. Some programs will involve detailed in-person assessments by fire professionals, but will be limited in impact due to a paucity of trained personnel. Other programs will involve high-tech data collection tools that efficiently cover large areas but

are both costly and limited in detail. And some programs will fall somewhere in between, using a combination of technology and personnel that best fits the needs of their community.

In the Tahoe Basin and in Austin, Texas, programs are on the qualitative end of the spectrum, with an emphasis on prescriptive in-person visits that directly enable homeowner actions to reduce risk. Assessment programs in southwest Colorado and Klamath County, Oregon have taken a more mixed approach, involving quick roadside assessments that assign a score to each home or property, followed by optional in-person assessments that delve deeper into specific issues and mitigation strategies. In Oregon, these efforts are further supported by an online platform, which allows homeowners to view and edit the data collected as part of the quick roadside assessments. These approaches are outlined in further detail in QG 2.1, Data and Tools.

Why assess fire hazards?

Though assessment programs clearly serve to identify hazards, they can provide other values at a range of scales. At the property scale, assessment programs can facilitate and help document mitigation efforts, expanding opportunities for the homeowner. For example, in Boulder County, Colorado, property owners can work through the assessment program to gain certification, which can increase their insurability. In that case, Boulder County has partnered with insurance companies to recruit homeowners to the assessment program; the goal is to work with at least 850 homeowners in the first two years of the program (2014-2015).

In the Tahoe Basin, assessment programs help homeowners navigate the Basin's strict regulatory environment and streamline mitigation efforts. The assessment program was developed in collaboration with the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, a multi-state regulatory body that oversees activities in the Basin. Assessors are trained not only to identify hazards, but also to recommend risk-reduction measures, mark trees and issue permits for thinning at the time of the assessment—all at little to no cost to the property owner.

At the community scale, the advantages of these programs are equally compelling. Assessment data contribute greatly to community wildfire protection plans (CWPPs) and other planning efforts, as they help identify high-risk areas and can enable project prioritization at a larger scale. Likewise, in areas where data are made accessible and fire departments are trained to use them, assessment databases can directly inform fire response. For example, in some parts of Oregon, a quick map-based query of an assessment database can yield detailed information about a specific community, including ingress and egress, presence of livestock, etc. These types of data can better facilitate fire response, allowing for better deployment of appropriate resources and reducing hazards for firefighters and other emergency responders.

Conclusion

This set of quick guides is meant to inform and inspire community leaders working on these issues. Although there are a number of assessment materials available online, the most effective programs are those that take advantage of existing networks and data, but are community based and have committed, creative staff leading programs unique to their regions.

Information for this series of quick guides was provided by community leaders from assessment programs throughout the country. For more information about the Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network, visit the website at http://www.facnetwork.org or email info@facnetwork.org.

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