

Barnes-Drummond and Northwestern Wisconsin Steps to Improve Community Preparedness for Wildfire

Community Preparedness Case Study Series

Case Study #7

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Like many people living in the Midwest, the residents of northwestern Wisconsin have had little experience with major wildfires like those that raged across the evening news in 2002. Fires in this part of the world usually cover a very small area. For example, from January to November 2002, a reported 800 wildfires in Wisconsin burned 1,611 acres, an average of 2 acres per fire.

As local residents and visitors look out on the oak, maple, and aspen forests that dominate the landscape, they are thankful they don't face the wildfire hazards of people living in the West or South. However, the forests of the Midwest aren't the fire-proof forests that many believe. Windstorms are common in this region, blowing down thousands of trees that can become a potential fuel problem if allowed to remain on the ground. For example, on July 31, 1999, a storm blew down trees on 100,000 acres of public and private land in northwestern Wisconsin. Another Midwest wildfire concern is that in many counties vast acres of pine (particularly jack pine) can easily ignite under dry conditions such as those experienced in recent years. In northwestern Wisconsin is the largest contiguous block of pine in the State. With most of the wildfires in the East caused by humans, the growing number of people living and recreating in the forests of northern Wisconsin increases the likelihood that a fire will start, either intentionally or accidentally. Having more people scattered across the landscape also increases the probability that if a fire gets started it will destroy property and threaten lives.



The residents of Barnes and Drummond, Wisconsin, are typical of others in the upper Midwest in regards to fire. For these folks, the major natural resource issues are whether or not they will get a deer and if they can use their ATV to drag the deer from the woods, or where the blueberries are thickest—fire just hasn't been a priority. However, forestry professionals are concerned about the growing wildfire threat in the region.

They look to aging pine stands, less rainfall in forests with sandy soils, and the growing number of people who form the wildland-urban inter-mix, and wonder when, not if, a major fire will occur in the region. In May 2002, the USDA Forest Service stationed a firefighting helicopter in northwestern Wisconsin. One reason given for choosing this location was "its proximity to a potential hot spot—a blowdown area between Drummond and Barnes of



Mixed forest common to northwestern Wisconsin.



Blowdown from a 1999 summer windstorm in northwestern Wisconsin.

damaged timber from July 1999 windstorms.” The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) has for years had air tankers and helicopters available in the region. However, as one county forester told us, when “we have the potential but we don’t have the occurrence,” it’s a challenge to motivate local residents.

Keys to Wildfire Preparedness in Barnes-Drummond

Provide leadership by public agencies

In Drummond and Barnes, the key to wildfire preparedness is leadership from the local representatives of county, State, and Federal forestry agencies. Drummond, located within the boundaries of the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest, counts on the Federal forest managers to control wildfire hazards. In Barnes, it’s the WDNR forester who is seen as the person responsible for wildfire preparedness. The mix of ownership in the area creates challenges for coordination, but offers opportunities for utilizing the strengths of each agency in building wildfire preparedness in the two communities.

Take every opportunity to educate and inform

People in this part of Wisconsin live in small towns and the woods, and around the area’s many lakes. Finding effective means of communicating with both permanent residents and second-home owners is problematic. Following the July 1999 storm, the WDNR forester visited every dwelling in the community, providing information on defensible space and the need for landowners to provide access for emergency vehicles. In the past, inspections of fire-prone property and homeowner education were done annually in cooperation with local Volunteer Fire Departments (VFDs), but these inspections were eliminated by WDNR budget cuts a decade ago.

Often, the first stop for visitors in the area is the local convenience store where they purchase licenses, obtain permits, and replenish supplies. Information on wildfire conditions and wildfire management are easily distributed at these locations. Local shop owners are key contacts for people who live in and visit the area.

Integrate wildfire preparedness with other local activities

When Bayfield County renumbered structures to meet demands of the 911-telephone system, they also thought about wildfire preparedness. They took the added step of developing a map book that not only shows all the roads and locations of various structures, but also the location of hydrants and lake access to assist in fire-fighting.

Encourage local forest industries to help the community when they can

After the July 1999 windstorm, during a particularly dry summer, the Wausau-Mosinee Paper Company—with land holdings throughout the state—paid for a large dozer and transport to park at the Barnes Ranger Station for use in fire suppression throughout the area. Local businesses and forest industries can often share their equipment as part of a community effort to improve preparedness and enhance safety.



During times of drought, pine forests on sandy soil present a major fire hazard.



◀ Small summer or hunting cabins in the Barnes-Drummond area are scattered throughout the landscape. ▶



Broaden responsibility and involvement in wildfire preparedness

Like many government organizations, the WDNR has been going through a reorganization, which has shuffled personnel and responsibilities. Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest personnel are also moved fairly frequently. This is a problem for wildfire management because so much of the success of these efforts is determined by trust developed between individuals representing their agencies. This trust deepens over time with frequent contact. Wildfire preparedness must be supported by a number of different people within one agency and by a number of different agencies or organizations. When responsibility for wildfire preparedness is shared throughout the community, the loss of one individual will have minimal impact.



County pine plantation north of Barnes.

Next Steps

Work to build more cooperation between different agencies

Bayfield County Forestry, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, and the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest are each currently doing their jobs as defined in rules and regulations. The biggest strides in wildfire preparedness are made when agencies break out of their boxes and look for new ways to work together.



In the Barnes area, people look to the State for wildfire management.

Strengthen partnerships with local civic and social organizations

There is a wealth of organized groups in the Barnes and Drummond communities. Groups like the American Legion, Ladies Auxiliary, Ladies Garden Club, Cemetery Committee, and local lake associations can all play a role in educating members and their families about wildfire preparedness. These community groups often define public agencies in terms of their law enforcement or regulatory responsibilities. As partners, these groups can help make wildfire preparedness a community commitment—much more than isolated actions by individuals and agencies.

Preparing for Wildfire: Lessons for Other Communities from Barnes-Drummond

1. Build on the strengths of local, State, and Federal agencies.
2. Develop wildfire preparedness activities on private land as part of broader forest management or forest health initiatives.
3. Begin your education before the wildfire crisis.
4. Ask for help from local businesses who may be in the position to loan equipment or other resources.



▲ *Improving access to summer and lake homes is critical to improving wildfire preparedness.*



◀ *Businesses in northwestern Wisconsin depend on timber from Federal, State, and private forest land as raw material for their products.*

Web Sites for More Information about Northwestern Wisconsin and Wildfire Preparedness

Bayfield County: www.bayfieldcounty.org

Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest: www.fs.fed.us/r9/cnnf/

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources: www.dnr.state.wi.us

National Fire Plan: www.fireplan.gov

Community Preparedness Study, North Central Research Station: www.ncrs.fs.fed.us/4803/Highlights.htm

Unless otherwise noted, photos are by Pam Jakes, USDA Forest Service.

The Wildfire Preparedness Project of the National Fire Plan

Communities across the U.S. have voiced increasing concern about how they can better prepare for wildfire. Even in areas of the country not traditionally thought of as having high fire risk, storms, changing climate, and pest/disease outbreaks have increased concern about the potential for catastrophic fire. In areas where fire is viewed as a natural part of the ecosystem, the fact that more and more people choose these places to live in means that there is a potential for major fire impacts. A team of scientists funded by the National Fire Plan have been visiting communities across the country to identify the activities communities are undertaking to increase wildfire preparedness, and the resources necessary to support these activities. The project is led by the North Central Research Station, in cooperation with the Pacific Northwest Research Station, University of Florida, University of Minnesota, and Southern Oregon University.

This is the first in a series of summaries reflecting findings of the case studies. Hard copies of this summary can be obtained from the individuals listed below. All case study summaries currently available can be found on the web at:

www.ncrs.fs.fed.us/4803/Highlights.htm

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