

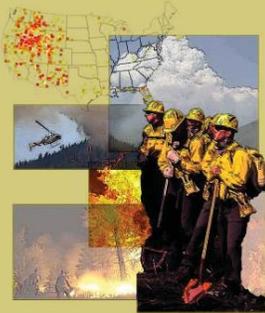
Roslyn, Washington

Steps to Improve Community Preparedness for Wildfire

Community Preparedness Case Study Series

Case Study #9

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Roslyn, Kittitas County, Washington

The eastern Cascade Mountain community of Roslyn lies in a bowl-like valley surrounded by thick forests. People first flocked to the area for coal. The Northern Pacific Railroad bought most of the land and platted the town in 1886. Roslyn's population peaked at 4,000 in 1910. When trains switched from coal to diesel, the mines began to shut down, with the last mine closing in 1963. The Roslyn townsite is on the National Historic Register so that its early 20th century appearance will be preserved.



Roslyn's most recent claim to fame was as Cicely, Alaska, in the 1990s television show Northern Exposure. Today Roslyn's population numbers around 900. As in several other eastside mountain communities, residents of Roslyn are facing challenges related to potential residential and resort development. Although some residents welcome the development and anticipated boost to the local economy, others fear loss of small town character, impacts to wildlife habitat, increasing traffic, and potential water shortages.

At the time of our research, most of the forest land adjacent to the townsite was owned by Plum Creek Timber or the City of Roslyn. There have been no catastrophic fires in recent memory, but fire danger is high due to lightning strikes to logging activity and recreation. The fire risk, combined with the wildland-urban interface (WUI) situation, concerned State and county officials. Based on a 1998 risk assessment, the Roslyn area was rated to be at extremely high risk because of topography and surrounding vegetation characterized by heavy brush and extensive ladder fuels extending into residential yards.

The wildfires in 2000 and 2001 raised awareness of fire danger. As a result of these fires, the Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR) applied for and received National Fire Plan funding. The DNR received a \$340,000 Federal grant to create a defensible space demonstration project in upper Kittitas County. The project evolved as a joint effort between the DNR, the Kittitas County Fire Marshal, USDA Forest Service Cle Elum Ranger District, and local fire departments and fire districts. The project had three tasks: 1) create a 150- to 200-foot-wide shaded fuel break around Roslyn, around the adjacent town of Ronald, and along the highway corridor connecting the two; 2) improve defensible space around the community school complex; and 3) create defensible space prescriptions for individual homesites and complete prescribed work using contract crews.

The object of the shaded fuel break was to keep fires on the ground and low in intensity so local fire crews would have a better chance of controlling them.



The town of Roslyn sits in a bowl surrounded by forests on the east side of the Cascade Mountains.

Keys to Wildfire Preparedness in and Around Roslyn

Take action to reduce fuels

In 2001, 864 homes were treated to reduce fuel loads. Trees were trimmed, brush was removed, and access was improved. In addition, 85 acres of shaded fuel break were created around the town.



The forests of Kittitas County extend like fingers into the town of Roslyn.

Roslyn's school complex serves as the emergency staging area for the community. To make it more able to survive a fire, trees and brush were trimmed and removed from the 11 acres of school grounds.

Church camps have been urged to reduce fuel loads and develop defensible space. This is important because there are 13 major church camps in Kittitas County with over 38,000 camper-days a year.

Publicize your efforts to increase knowledge and interest

Media coverage of the activities in and around Roslyn has been extensive. Seattle and Yakima television stations provided local coverage, and CNN and National Public Radio spread the story nation-wide. Local and regional print media ran several stories during the course of the project.

Build public awareness through outreach and education

The development of Roslyn's shaded fuel break provided an opportunity to educate many local residents. In addition, students were curious about what was happening on their school grounds. As a result of their curiosity and the initiative of teachers, the County Fire Marshal, DNR Fuels Management Technician,

and Forest Service Fire Management Officer developed a Jr. FireWise program, which has been added to the middle school curriculum.

The Washington State Master Gardeners have been recruited to the wildfire management cause. At fairs and community events throughout the region, they promote fire-resistant and drought-resistant plants.

As a result of the different activities occurring in and around Roslyn, a local fire prevention cooperative was re-established to focus on creating and maintaining defensible space. The co-op produced a video to use as a training aid.



Middle school students in the Jr. FireWise program illustrate good landscaping techniques.

What's Next for Roslyn and Kittitas County?

The Roslyn area faces several challenges as it works to sustain and improve wildfire preparedness.

Motivating absentee homeowners

Because some landowners visit their land only occasionally, it is difficult to create defensible space. Improved efforts in this area will be critical to maintain Roslyn's wildfire preparedness.

Covering "outlier" properties

Not all of Kittitas County is covered by a fire district. A mechanism is needed that ensures that property outside established fire districts receives the attention necessary to improve and maintain wildfire preparedness.

Maintaining shaded fuel break

Ongoing maintenance of shaded fuel breaks will be a challenge. Fuel breaks need to be maintained every 3 years.

Disposing of debris and slash

Wood chips and other debris from the maintenance of the shaded fuel break and defensible space can build up, creating their own wildfire management problem. New approaches are needed to use or dispose of this material.



Vegetation around homes in Roslyn has been thinned to create more defensible space.

Preparing for Wildfire: Lessons for Other Communities from Roslyn and Kittitas County

1. Develop and build on strong, committed local agency participation.
2. Involve the local fire department. Local firefighters know people in the community and can answer questions and explain the project to their neighbors. They already have the trust and respect of the community.
3. Create awareness through public education. Mass mailings, door hangers, flyers in newspapers, public meetings, field trips, FireWise classes, and landscaping workshops are all ways to increase awareness.
4. Take advantage of teachable moments.
5. Capitalize on opportunities for cooperation and collaboration.
6. Maximize opportunities to provide press releases and get media coverage.
7. Start with small demonstration projects and arrange field trips to get people to the demonstration sites.
8. Be open to emergent opportunities and unexpected partners.
9. Look for opportunities to engage private partners.
10. Sponsor workshops for developers and new homeowners.



Kittitas County and the Cle Elum Ranger District of the Wenatchee National Forest have been partners in producing shaded fuel breaks like the one shown in the middle photo.



Web Sites for More Information About Roslyn and Wildfire Preparedness

Kittitas County: <http://www.co.kittitas.wa.us>

Washington Department of Natural Resources: <http://www.dnr.wa.gov>

Washington Master Gardeners: <http://www.mastergardener.wsu.edu>

Wenatchee National Forest, USDA Forest Service: <http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/wenatchee>

North Central Research Station, USDA Forest Service: <http://www.ncrs.fs.fed.us>

All photos by Pam Jakes or Linda Kruger, 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 to identify 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 one 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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National Fire Plan
Managing the Impact of Wildfires on the
Communities and the Environment



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