

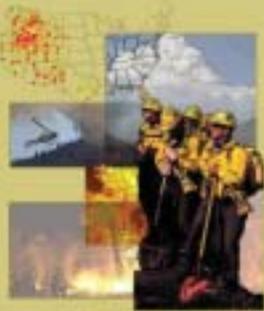
Waldo, Florida

Steps to Improve Community Preparedness for Wildfire

Community Preparedness Case Study Series

Case Study #6

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Waldo, Florida

Waldo is a small rural community in north-central Florida. The town grew at the intersection of an early road and the first railroad into the region. It once thrived as a farming town and tourist destination, but when the interstate went elsewhere and the railroad shifted operations to a larger city, the town's population began to shrink. However, the people who remain in Waldo share a strong sense of community.



Separating Waldo from the neighboring towns of Starke (population 5,600) and Gainesville (population 100,000) are miles of pine plantations, rangeland, pecan groves, and forests. Like many other small rural towns, Waldo is at risk of wildland fire due to the broad expanse of forested land that surrounds it. This land is not within Waldo's jurisdiction, which reduces the community's options for managing this risk.

The residents of Waldo are proud of their fire department with its six paid staff members. Alachua County has contracted with Waldo to extend the city's fire suppression and emergency medical response into the unincorporated areas adjacent to Waldo; they may be first on the scene with an engine and a brush truck.

In the summer of 1998 much of Florida was burning. That year Waldo was evacuated due to nearby fires. After firefighters battled the blaze for 3 days, it crossed the Waldo town boundary, damaging one structure. Local firefighters were assisted by the Alachua County Fire Rescue (ACFR) and Florida Division of Forestry (DOF). Two factors contributed to the 1998 fires—heavy fuel loads and hot, dry, windy weather. Fires again threatened Waldo in 2000.

The 1998 fire season prompted major new wildfire management initiatives in the DOF and other agencies. Although strong agency commitment has and will play a role in saving the town, some relationships and connections at the local level help give Waldo residents an attitude of participation during emergency response. Today firefighters and citizens in Waldo are more aware of the threat of wildland fires and more prepared to do battle.

Keys to Wildfire Preparedness in Waldo

Experience

Community leaders agree that Waldo's 1998 wildfire experience was the impetus to improving wildfire equipment, training, and communication. The fire was a learning experience for many of the paid and volunteer firefighters. It had been many



Pine plantation on the outskirts of Waldo, Florida.

years since a wildfire of this size occurred in Alachua County. The severity of the fire made some leaders and residents critically aware of how vulnerable Waldo is.



Main street of Waldo, Florida.

Relationships and Networks

In small towns, people know each other. They might share a grandmother, attend the same church, or work together on a logging job. These relationships are significant in a crisis. During the 1998 fires, the large Fellowship Hall of the First Baptist Church was used as the feeding center for all firefighting personnel. Waldo church members organized themselves to serve three meals to firefighters daily with food provided by the ACFR. Their success gave these Waldo residents a belief that they can organize themselves to help in case of an emergency. It didn't take them long to revitalize their kitchen crew when fire came close to the town in 2000. It was an effort that few would have thought possible before the fires.

In another example of relationships, a conversation between the Mayor, who works at the University of Florida, and a botany professor resulted in an effort by the University's Conservation Law Clinic to identify possible ordinances that would require owners of large land holdings adjacent to Waldo to undertake mitigation activities to create a "safety belt" for the town. Although ordinances were never implemented, the exercise brought together a variety of people to think about how to assist a small community like Waldo.

Agency Commitment and Communication

Waldo's small jurisdiction and budget means it must depend on other agencies for many wildfire management activities. The ACFR and DOF are increasing mitigation and education activities and improving communication systems. The DOF stationed a staff person at the Waldo Fire Department and helped make a hero out of a local long-time prescribed burner. A DOF liaison officer in each district also communicates with the local fire departments and large landowners before the fire season to inform them of weather predictions, equipment locations, and available resources.

Small town managers in Alachua County organized their own disaster communication system. This system serves an emergency management function for the county. The Florida Fire Chiefs Association and the Florida State Fire Marshal have established seven caches of communication equipment around the state, including one in Waldo. The system was in place for the 2000 fire season.

Resources and Equipment

After the 1998 fires, the Waldo Fire Department bought two surplus military trucks and converted them into brush trucks with water tanks at a significant savings over new vehicles. All Waldo Fire Department firefighters have wildland firefighting gear and attend wildland firefighting training. Alachua County also added equipment following the 1998 fires—four brush trucks, one water tender, and wildland firefighting protective gear for all staff. The State has added a whole range of new equipment from gyrotracks, mowers, and plows to brush trucks and helicopters that are available to mitigate and fight wildland fires.



Waldo, Florida, Fire Department.

Agreements and Contracts

Waldo and Alachua County participate in a statewide catastrophic mutual assistance agreement that commits them to provide and receive assets including people and equipment in case of an emergency. This agreement provided assistance from dozens of other departments during 1998 and 2000 fires.

Other County and State Initiatives

Several initiatives at the county and State levels are being taken to manage wildfire. First, several agencies are taking steps to improve wildfire education. Many of their messages complement the national FIREWISE program. Local staffs visit schools, set up displays in malls, and even go to neighborhoods to inform residents of their risks. Regional Prescribed Fire Councils have been active with the State legislature to sponsor public awareness weeks and quarterly meetings.



Waldo, Florida, forest landowner.

Alachua County's new Comprehensive Plan now includes "FireWise Communities Practices." The new development policy includes a "fire hazard program" using satellite and aerial photography to determine wildfire exposure potential, and it requires all new development to include passive measures for protecting structures and occupants from wildland fire. Public education, mitigation on county-managed lands, and zoning in accordance with the statewide fire hazard risk analysis system are included in the plan.

Prescribed fire, fuel breaks, thinning, and mowing activities are conducted with landowner approval around subdivisions and communities, including Waldo. A statewide effort to reduce hazardous fuel loads near communities is being led by four DOF wildfire mitigation teams. Regional wildfire mitigation specialists coordinate media and education programs.

The DOF conducts training for Prescribed Burner Certification as well as a host of Incident Command courses at the new Center for Wildland and Forest Resource Management Training. There are currently four complete Incident Command teams made up of DOF and local fire department staff members in Florida. Most of the members have had fire experience in Florida and in other states.

Finally, the ACFR has a trained and experienced overhead command team for both initial response and extended response and command, and this team can operate alone for 2 weeks before needing relief. Also, ACFR management staff are qualified and participate on many of the statewide overhead management teams.

Wildfire Preparedness Lessons for Other Communities from Waldo

1. Work with your neighbors. For example, sign agreements and cooperate with other communities to extend your level of protection.
2. Work with county and State agencies to prepare for wildfire.
3. Act now. There are a number of steps that communities can take ahead of a fire to improve their preparedness, including developing and testing an evacuation plan, identifying staging areas, and making sure the local water supply is sufficient to fight wildfire.
4. Keep residents informed. Educate residents on local wildfire management plans and their role in them.
5. Use local planning processes to guide new developments toward less hazardous sites or to ensure that developers invest in appropriate mitigation activities.



Utility line maintained as a fire break on the outskirts of Waldo, Florida.

6. Use local governmental powers to develop ordinances that encourage activities that enhance wildfire preparedness. For example, an ordinance that encourages the retrofit of existing structures could improve passive protection from wildfire.
7. Increase firefighters' training for wildland fire suppression and mitigation.
8. Negotiate or regulate forest management practices to reduce wildfire risk on lands surrounding the community.

Web Sites for More Information about Waldo and Wildfire Preparedness

Florida Division of Forestry: www.fl-dof.com/

Alachua County Fire Rescue: www.firerescue.alachua.fl.us/

Cooperative Extension Service at the School of Forest Resources and Conservation; UF: www.sfrc.ufl.edu

National FIREWISE Communities Program: www.firewise.org/communities

Photos are from Shruti Agrawal and Martha Monroe, University of Florida.

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 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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