



# Reducing Wildfire Risks: 3 Powerful Tips to Move People to Action

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This white paper contains some basic information about reducing wildfire risks. It refers to an NFPA program, the Firewise USA® recognition program, as of date of publication. The content of this white paper is not the complete and official position of the NFPA on the referenced topics. For free access to the complete and most current version of these and all NFPA programs and documents, please go to [www.nfpa.org](http://www.nfpa.org). The NFPA makes no warranty or guaranty of the completeness of the information in this white paper. In using this information, you should rely on your independent judgment and, when appropriate, consult a competent professional and your local authority having jurisdiction.

# WHAT MOTIVATES PEOPLE TO REDUCE WILDFIRE RISKS? POWERFUL FINDINGS FROM AN NFPA SURVEY.

## IT'S GOING TO TAKE A DISASTER ... OR IS IT?

Conventional wisdom says it takes a disaster to get people to do anything about their safety. While it's often true that experience with wildfire — whether suffering disruption and loss or simply having a "close call" — is a motivating factor for many residents to start reducing risk, NFPA has recently discovered powerful influences you can use to inspire people in your community to take action.

A recent survey<sup>i</sup> of residents in wildfire-prone areas of Arizona, California, Colorado, and Texas supports the idea that knowledge is power when it comes to influencing homeowners' decision-making about wildfire risk reduction.

During the summer of 2016, NFPA partnered with a major insurer to survey community leaders in 354 Firewise USA<sup>®</sup> sites in those states and more than 2,200 policyholders in areas of the same states that were outside the Firewise USA<sup>®</sup> site boundaries. This survey helped NFPA and the insurance company understand the differences between the residents' attitudes and activities within and outside formal Firewise USA<sup>®</sup> sites. The results also uncovered critical factors that influence the residents' choices to take action to reduce the risk of wildfire damage to their homes.

Results showed that the vast majority (81 percent) of respondents living in these wildfire-prone states had done some kind of wildfire risk reduction activity on their property within the previous 2 years; this included brush clearance, limbing trees, and removing debris from gutters and decks. It also found that most people (89 percent) cited the desire to protect their family and property as their main reason to mitigate wildfire risks. (see Figure 1 on the next page). The second highest reason given to take action was recent experience of a local wildfire (36 percent).<sup>ii</sup>

A wildfire experience is powerful, and the impact to homes, businesses and neighborhoods was reflected in many of the responses. When the active risk-reducers were asked if there was an "ah-ha moment" or trigger they had experienced that motivated them to start working on safety projects, more than half, or 56

percent, said they had had a close call with wildfire.<sup>iii</sup> Even though the majority of the total respondents had not experienced direct loss from a wildfire, two-thirds of all respondents said they personally evacuated their premises due to a wildfire emergency.

The good news is that many residents in wildfire-prone areas are taking risk reduction steps and are highly motivated by their desire to protect family and property. But does it take a wildfire evacuation, a loss, or a close call to get residents to finally take wildfire risk reduction actions? The survey indicated that there are other powerful influences that can be used to help motivate residents, without waiting for the next wildfire to occur.

## SEEING IS BELIEVING

The theme of learning emerged strongly throughout the survey results as a powerful trigger or motivator to residents, spurring them to take wildfire risk reduction steps. This finding echoes a body of social science research that found that, "interactive learning is both the preferred and the most effective means of providing information to foster homeowner mitigation."<sup>iv</sup>

Learning about local fire risk and fire history, specific home vulnerabilities, and the benefits of mitigation were common themes for motivation among residents who said they had a "trigger" to inspire them to take action. An analysis of the respondents' descriptive answers about these "ah-ha moments" centered on learning.<sup>iv</sup> Thirty-five percent of the responses indicated that residents either became aware of local fire risk and history, or were informed about risk and mitigation opportunities by a local expert, such as the Fire Council, CWPP, or Firewise USA<sup>®</sup> resident leader. Another 9 percent became aware of increased fire risk in their area, and 7 percent said they saw or learned of the benefits of wildfire mitigation. Six percent received a site visit from an expert who came to their home and helped them understand the specific vulnerability of their property and—more importantly—what they could do about it. Figure 2, on the next page, describes the types of triggers people identified as their motivation to take action.<sup>vi</sup>

In the survey's open-ended question about reasons for mitigating — where respondents could



Figure 1: Reasons for Mitigating

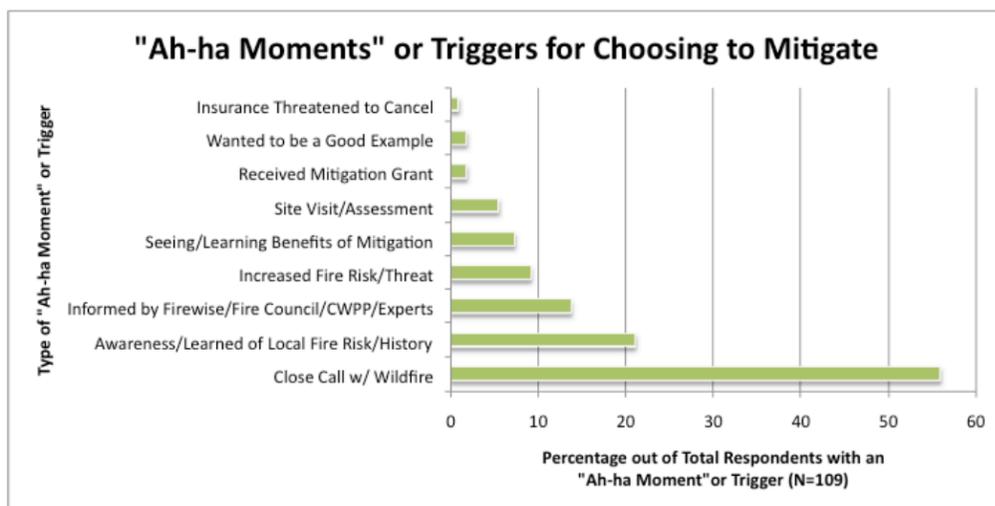


Figure 2: Type of "Ah-ha Moment" or Trigger

choose as many responses as they felt applied to them — engagement with local experts who educated or convinced them to work on wildfire risk reduction was an extremely important factor. A third of respondents said their fire department convinced them. Twenty-eight percent said they were convinced by a forester or other professional. Smaller percentages indicated increased awareness of fire risk or receiving guidance from local councils or community organizations (both 6 percent) were significant influences on their choices.

## WHAT MORE CAN WE DO TO GET RESIDENTS TO ACT?

Overall, 79 percent of respondents indicated that they had plans to conduct wildfire mitigation around their homes in the next year. This was about the same number of people who say they have already been conducting wildfire risk reduction activities. When asked about incentives, financial incentives such as insurance discounts or premium reductions, or tax rate reductions rated highly (70 percent to 80 percent). Financial conse-

quences such as penalties or fines were still influential, but much less popular. Just under half of the respondents agreed that these penalties would motivate them to take action. Respondents also indicated the need for monetary and in-kind support — such as labor for the heavy lifting of wildfire risk reduction — in addition to professional advice, assessments, and education.

These needs were reflected in a question about the obstacles residents faced in accomplishing wildfire risk reduction. Of the 37 percent who indicated they faced obstacles, cost and labor headed the list. However, respondents cited the need for more expert advice and professional services to ensure the work being done was the most effective for reducing risk. They also cited physical or age-related limitations, absentee landowners, neighbor resistance or apathy to mitigation, and site-specific problems such as rough terrain and dense vegetation, as obstacles. In spite of these obstacles, it's important to realize that respondents who said they faced obstacles were only slightly less likely to have mitigated recently, or to have plans for future mitigation work.

## THE INFLUENCE OF FIREWISE USA® PARTICIPATION

The survey results in aggregate show a highly engaged and motivated group of residents across four states. In many areas, the attitude and activities of residents outside the Firewise USA® sites was very similar to the Firewise USA® resident leaders surveyed.

A few important differences show how residents in Firewise USA® sites may have an advantage over their non-participating neighbors in accessing information and resources. Firewise USA® resident respondents were much more likely to use advice from the national program staff, fire departments, and state forestry agencies. This indicates more familiarity and engagement with key sources of wildfire risk reduction expertise and information. Firewise USA® resident respondents were much more likely to say that they mitigated because of advice from the fire department, forester, or other professional.

These connections are paying off for residents in Firewise USA® sites. Those respondents were five times more likely to indicate they had received a grant or other financial incentive than their neighbors in non-participating communities. Firewise USA® sites must follow a set of criteria that requires organization at the community level, so it stands to reason that a committed, organized community group is more likely to have access to grant funding than individuals working on mitigation without this network.

Finally, Firewise USA® resident respondents were significantly more likely to conduct risk reduction

activities frequently (weekly, monthly, and several times annually), and to take on household improvements for wildfire safety beyond brush and debris clearance.

"Firewise USA® resident respondents were **five times** more likely to have received a grant than respondents in non-participating communities."

## ACTING ON THE FINDINGS: THREE TIPS TO HELP PEOPLE BECOME SAFER

In conclusion, this survey found that in four states where wildfire is a major hazard, most of the residents surveyed are aware of the risk, motivated to protect their homes and families, taking some kind of action, and plan to do more in the future. This is all good news. Although they indicate that wildfire experience and "close calls" were motivating, residents equally felt that their engagement with fire experts and reliable sources of information were helping them learn and understand what to do to reduce risk. Residents find fire departments and state and local forestry personnel to be among the most credible and reliable sources for wildfire mitigation advice. Residents who have organized across their neighborhood as a Firewise USA® site have advantages in terms of support and resources and are more likely to mitigate frequently.

Therefore, advocates for wildfire risk reduction have real opportunities to help more residents take effective steps to curb future losses and suffering. If you're in a position to help, here are three ways you can use these findings:

### 1. Take advantage of a "close call."

Awareness and interest are high when a wildfire occurs, even if the community doesn't suffer direct damage. Use the opportunity to provide them with sound information and resources on community risk reduction.

### 2. Feed people's hunger to learn.

Residents are aware of risk and eager to learn. Provide opportunities for resident education through demonstrations, site visits, workshops, talks, or webinars. Discuss the risks, but follow it up with risk reduction advice.

### 3. Introduce the Firewise USA® recognition program.

Help neighbors learn how to organize as a Firewise USA® site by following the criteria and using the wealth of resources available at [www.firewise.org](http://www.firewise.org).

## END NOTES

<sup>i</sup> Unpublished survey, NFPA and USAA, 2016.

<sup>ii</sup> Figure 1, Reasons to Mitigate from *NFPA/USAA Wildfire Mitigation Survey: Descriptive Statistics, Comparative Analyses, and Qualitative Findings for Select Data*, prepared by Rachel Madsen, Ph.D., Research Consultant, August 2017.

<sup>iii</sup> The question about whether respondents who indicated recent mitigation activity had an "ah-ha moment" or trigger for choosing to mitigate was a yes or no question, with open-ended answers describing the trigger. Eighty-one percent of total respondents said they had done mitigation within the past 2 years; of this group, 30 percent said that they had an "ah-ha moment" or trigger for choosing to mitigate. Respondents may have indicated more than one specific trigger in addition to a close call with wildfire.

<sup>iv</sup> From *Fire Science and Management*, "Community Wildfire Preparedness: a Global State-of-the-Knowledge Summary of Social Science Research," by Sarah McCaffrey (Published online 19 April 2015, Springer International Publishing AG). "Many studies re-enforce a finding noted

in the previous synthesis: that interactive learning is both the preferred and the most effective means of providing information to foster homeowner mitigation. Recent research has validated the importance of interactive learning whether the focus is on preparedness in relation to home resilience or response during a fire. A study to identify the factors that influence mitigation activities of Colorado homeowners found that information from the county wildfire specialist had the largest effect on number of actions taken; this was attributed in part to the ability of that specialist to tailor information to individual contexts."

<sup>v</sup> *NFPA/USAA Wildfire Mitigation Survey: Descriptive Statistics, Comparative Analyses, and Qualitative Findings for Select Data*, prepared by Rachel Madsen, Ph.D., Research Consultant, August 2017.

<sup>vi</sup> Figure 2, Type of "Ah-ha Moment" or Trigger from *NFPA/USAA Wildfire Mitigation Survey: Descriptive Statistics, Comparative Analyses, and Qualitative Findings for Select Data*, prepared by Rachel Madsen, Ph.D., Research Consultant, August 2017.

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

As you continue to search for ways to expand your knowledge base and sharpen your wildfire knowledge and skills, we also offer training and certification options in wildfire preparedness, including:

**Certified Wildfire Mitigation Specialist (CWMS):** This credential provides you with an opportunity to demonstrate knowledge in hazard mitigation measures, planning and preparedness strategies, public education practices, and wildland fire science. [nfpa.org/cwms](https://www.nfpa.org/cwms)

**Assessing Structure Ignition Potential From Wildfire Training:** This course is taught by industry experts and prepares you with the skills and knowledge to identify wildland fire risks to structures and to offer actionable advice to property owners on effective safety measures. [nfpa.org/asip](https://www.nfpa.org/asip)