

Tri-County FireSafe Working Group.

The group membership includes individual citizens, local government, state and federal agencies, interested contractors, and fire suppression departments. Members are from the counties of Lewis & Clark, Jefferson, and Broadwater. This group was the recipient of the FEMA “EXEMPLARY PRACTICES” award in the year 2000 for its outstanding outreach program. Our program was featured in the 2004 FEMA publication *At Home in the Woods; Lessons Learned in the Wildland/Urban Interface*.

The group meets on a monthly basis. Since its initiation following the North Hill fire of 1984 this group has had the primary mission of fire prevention education. It undertook a project to map the fuel hazard risk in the interface areas of the counties it represents. When Lewis & Clark County received the Federal Emergency Management Agency “PROJECT IMPACT” grant program this committee was well suited to be the “fire” committee. The group found that with the money available for hazard mitigation in general, and with the generous match provided by numerous members and landowners it was able to step out of the role of talking about fire prevention and mitigation to a very proactive position of wildland fuel hazard reduction projects. The mapping project continues in the three counties, along with the education and awareness programs and fuel hazard reduction in the wildland urban interface.

With the FEMA Project Impact funding no longer available, the committee has been successful in receiving Hazard Mitigation grants through Montana Disaster and Emergency Services for fuel hazard reduction on City of Helena open space land, and private lands in the Wolf Creek, MT area. The group has been successful in obtaining National Fire Plan Grants in 2001, 2002 and 2004 to develop the program for individual defensible space projects, and develop projects for Non-Industrial Private Forest owners. The Bureau of Land Management is assisting the fuel hazard reduction program with Community Assistance Agreements entered into during the fall of 2003.

The number, scope, and types of projects has continued to grow with available funding opportunities and experience levels of the parties involved. The program continues to provide defensible space around homes in the interface, but has undertaken subdivision-wide protection projects, and is expanding into projects with larger tract non-industrial private forest landowners.

The Tri-County Fire Working Group is continuing its work with the local and state Disaster and Emergency Services agencies through the FEMA Pre-Disaster Mitigation Program. The goal is to maintain the interagency flavor and relationships developed over the past years to provide wildland fire mitigation planning, population protection, and meaningful projects to sustain forest health and natural aesthetics in wildland/urban interface settings.