

## **FIRESMART AND HRM**

The history of wildland fires across North America has shown more and more devastating **Wildland Urban Interface** or **WUI** fires. Simply put, the WUI is any area where the forest or trees meet the community or structures. It can range from summer camps to high density housing bordering green belts. History has shown that we often can't stop wildland fires from burning our communities unless we are willing to make long term commitments to protecting ourselves.

Most people believe that wildfires are extinguished by firefighters. While this is most often the case, it is certainly not the norm for the larger and spectacular "crown" fires. These are the fires that burn up to the tops or "crowns" of the trees. The nature of wildfires is such that, very often, they are just too powerful for us to extinguish. Most of the major wildland fires are stopped by one of two things, a change in weather or running out of fuel.

Since we can't change the weather, the strategy that is used for wildland fire is to address the fuel. Firefighters will make a stand by using either natural barriers like rivers and lakes or man made barriers like highways or fire breaks created by teams of firefighters. The idea is that a fire will stop when it runs out of fuel. Once a fire break is selected, any fire that progresses across the firebreak will be small enough to be extinguished by

firefighters and equipment at the ready to do so. Typically the hazard is from embers that are thrown up by the convective heat from a fire. This method is difficult and labour intensive and there are many times when there are no natural barriers nor is there time to make man made breaks. When this happens we often see the larger, more destructive fires which are more expensive to suppress and which threaten our communities.

The pictures that you often see of air tankers, which most people call water bombers, often suggest that these machines put out the fires. While this is sometimes the case, they are primarily used to slow down a fire so that a fire break can be created or used to protect a very specific area.

To bring the picture to a little more clarity, for us in HRM, we also have to realize that our fires often occur very close to where we live. In the time that it would take to get air tanker support to the scene, a fire could already have burned it's way to structures and done it's damage.

Another key consideration when we think of air tankers is their payload is delivered with quite a force. Pilots who fly these planes are careful where and how they drop so that they don't injure firefighters, other emergency responders, general public or cause structure damage. They would be of limited use in the heavy residentially developed areas of HRM.

None of this means that air tankers wouldn't and couldn't be useful to us; but, it does mean that air tankers are not the ultimate solution to the real problem. Air tankers just aren't a

guarantee that we would be able to stop wildfires or prevent losses to our community.

The events of 2003 brought the problem to an incredible focus because of two extremely bad firestorms. The wildfires in California and British Columbia caused huge amounts of damage and financial loss. The California fires destroyed more than 4000 homes and the total for the British Columbia fires was over 700 million dollars!

As with any disaster, reports were commissioned and completed to address what went wrong and also to make recommendations to prevent the same things from happening in the future. There are some communities that have been destroyed in the same way more than once! These reports hope to inform and educate so that we can all learn enough to prevent it from happening again.

Looking at the simple facts regarding wildfires and our ability to deal with them, what can we reasonably do to prevent these disasters from happening again and again? We can't change the weather and it is too expensive to provide adequate resources to guarantee that we could extinguish fires located on the urban interface before they cause structure damage in our communities. What we can do is address the one key element that we already use to deal with wildfires: The fuel!

We know that fires can't burn when they run out of fuel and we know that we use this technique to control fires now. The best way to address the issue is to make our communities less likely to burn. This involves a change in our lifestyle in the WUI. It

involves planning for the wildfires that we know will happen. It involves every property owner and every community taking responsibility for the survivability their property and of the community should a wildfire occur. We can do this by reducing the fuel in and around our community.

We can incorporate this idea into our thinking right from the start and carry it through to a lifestyle. When we are planning new development, we address the infrastructure needed to make the community work but now we know that part of that infrastructure needs to be protection from wildland fire. We can use well documented and successful ideas to use green areas and landscape guidelines that will prevent wildfires from burning structures. In essence, we create firebreaks long before a fire occurs rather than trying to scramble to create one while a fire advances on us.

In areas that are already established, we use fuel reduction strategies to accomplish this task. Look around your community and see how many properties have softwood trees like spruce and fir growing right up to the homes. Ask yourself how anyone could stop a wildfire from burning these homes when the trees are so close. Now consider properties where there is a lawn area separating the forest from the homes and think how much easier it would be for a home to survive with that separation. With proper planning wildfires could become a very nasty occurrence rather than a disaster that destroys our homes and communities.

There is a program that has been around in several forms for years all across Canada and the United States and is used by

many communities. It has proven very successful in areas where fires have occurred. The name used here in Canada is FireSmart. The research has been done. The process has been proven and it is feasible to use in planning as well as able to be retrofitted into an already established community. It is the first thing recommended whenever a report is completed after a wildfire disaster and has been strongly recommended by the report from British Columbia. It is not specific to British Columbia or California, rather it is recommended for **any** WUI community.

FireSmart is a comprehensive program that addresses the problem of **Wildland Urban Interface (WUI)** fires. FireSmart lays out guidelines and procedures that address everything from long term community planning to restoring a community after a devastating WUI fire.

A program like FireSmart may not please everyone but it is a reasonable way to address a problem which **is** real and is difficult to tackle in any other manner. With reports being tabled that warn us of the dangers involved with the WUI and the added suppression hazards that we face in the wake of Hurricane Juan, we don't have much choice but to address the situation in the best way possible. FireSmart is not the complete solution to our problem but it is a big step in the right direction.

The disasters have happened elsewhere and as we grow the possibility of them happening keeps increasing. In the HRM we have been very lucky a couple of times in the past couple of years, first with the Kingswood fire and then with the Cole Harbour/Eastern Passage fire . We have huge areas of WUI and

we need the cooperation and assistance of every citizen who lives in and every developer who builds in the urban interface to understand, accept and participate in the FireSmart program.

Support and promotion of the FireSmart program can and will result in an informed, empowered public who can help us in the fire service help them.