



Home/Land Security: Congress Acts for Fire Safe Communities

Members of Congress continue to roll out innovative legislative proposals to deal with some of the "burning issues" affecting wildland fire management. The most recent example is Senator Diane Feinstein's (D-CA) newly-introduced "**Fire Safe Communities Act.**" It provides several financial incentives for communities to take proactive, effective steps to prepare for wildfire.

One of the most difficult challenges facing fire managers is protecting the Wildland/Urban Interface (WUI-pronounced "WOO-ee") from wildfire destruction. Because most homes in the WUI Zone are unprepared and highly vulnerable to wildfire destruction, the WUI distorts many of the priorities and constrains many of the prerogatives of fire managers. For example, instead of igniting prescribed fires at opportune times and places to reduce fuels, managers are often stymied by local residents who are bothered by smoke. Instead of implementing fire use tactics to maximize the ecological benefits of wildfire, managers almost always suppress fire if there is even a remote chance of the fire spreading to a community. Despite billions of dollars spent in recent years on fire suppression or fuels reduction, every year hundreds of homes are tragically destroyed by wildfire.



Programs such as FireWise have been established to educate homeowners and communities about how to take responsibility for wildfire preparedness in the location, design, construction, and maintenance of homes and landscaping in order to reduce home ignitability. Research by Jack Cohen of the U.S. Forest Service's Fire Sciences Lab, for example, has shown that **if homeowners simply replace their roofs with nonflammable materials and manage their vegetation within 30 feet of their structures, they increase the probability of their homes surviving high-intensity wildfires by more than 90%! Despite these compelling research findings and educational programs, though, too many homeowners and communities fail to plan and prepare for wildfire, and passively wait for the inevitable ignition to occur with the expectation that firefighters will be able to save them.**

When wildfires ignite near or far from communities, panic sets in among homeowners, the news media, and politicians, who then put immense pressure on fire managers to spare no expense or hold no quarter in efforts to aggressively suppress wildfire. But, when conditions for high-intensity wildfire prevail, firefighters may be powerless to stop fire spread, and once embers or flames enter the WUI Zone, unprepared homes provide a receptive fuelbed that can be even more flammable than surrounding wildland vegetation. Wildland fires then become urban conflagrations - converting what could have been a beneficial natural disturbance into a dreadful unnatural disaster.

Past Administrations and Congresses attempted to prevent wildfire disasters by either increasing money for

fire suppression (e.g. the National Fire Plan) or reducing regulations for commercial logging on public lands (e.g. the Healthy Forests Restoration Act). Neither of these provided effective solutions to the problem of WUI wildfire disasters. **Now, it appears that Congress is tackling this issue at the strategic location where solutions may lie: among private homeowners and communities living in the WUI Zone.** The Fire Safe Communities Act makes a compelling offer: if homeowners and communities take the necessary steps to develop FireWise structures, then if a wildfire does destroy homes, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) will provide disaster assistance up to 90% of the cost of rebuilding lost homes - a significant increase from current disaster aid levels. This Bill also sets up a new \$25 million grant program and authorizes the Forest Service and Department of Interior agencies to offer grants to help owners to retrofit their homes, and assist communities to develop, inspect, and enforce new fire-resistant building codes and defensible space ordinances.

With a traditional fire insurance policy, homeowners pay premiums to a company and then (hopefully!) never see any financial return, or if their homes are destroyed, too often the insurance payoff does not fully finance home rebuilding - or adequately compensates for the loss of irreplaceable personal items. **The Fire Safe Communities Act provides incentives to homeowners and communities to invest their own money to retrofit homes and maintain vegetation on their own private lands,** which not only is the most effective method for preventing home wildfire damage, but also provides immediate tangible benefits in the increased security and beauty of FireWise and FireSafe dwellings.

One of the greatest potential benefits of the Fire Safe Communities Act is that **if and when homes in the WUI Zone become better prepared for wildfires, this vastly increases the options and opportunities for fire managers to utilize controlled burning and wildland fire use to maintain the ecological integrity of surrounding public lands.** Homes with fire-resistant construction and defensible space will no longer place wildland firefighters in extremely risky positions attempting to protect structures. Indeed, the sooner communities are prepared for fire, the sooner ecosystems can be restored and maintained with fire. The design of the Fire Safe Communities Act is a "win win" for both private and public interests.

FUSEE promotes a new partnership ethic between rural homeowners and wildland firefighters, with each doing their share to proactively prevent home wildfire destruction. **We see the Fire Safe Communities Act as serving a useful role in providing incentives to private property owners and community leaders to "do their homework" to prevent WUI wildfire disasters.** This would make another big step toward our long-term vision of fire-compatible communities living safely and sustainably in fire-permeable landscapes. For more information, check out our [Community Fire Preparedness](#) manuals and research papers posted in the Safety section of FUSEE's website.

FUSEE offers fire management workers from federal agencies a safe, legal, confidential means of educating policymakers in Congress and the Administration through our collective voice. [Join FUSEE today](#) and lend your voice to the cause of progressive fire policy and legislation.

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FUSEE supports a growing network of progressive fire professionals who envision a new fire management paradigm that interconnects firefighter safety with professional ethics and ecological restoration.



We strive to provide a safe forum and a collective voice for public and private sector fire management professionals to educate the public, policymakers, and the press about the challenges facing fire management today.

If you would like more information about FUSEE, don't hesitate to [contact us](#) or visit our [website](#). We look forward to hearing from you.

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