



American Planning Association  
NEWS RELEASE

---

Contact: Roberta Rewers, APA, 312-786-6395; [rewers@planning.org](mailto:rewers@planning.org)

## Mitigating Wildfire Damage

APA releases report on how communities and residents can reduce wildfire devastation

**CHICAGO**—More people are choosing to live in fire-prone wildlands than ever before. What precautions are necessary for residents to successfully coexist with nature in such a hazardous context? The American Planning Association (APA) has released a new report on how communities can help mitigate wildfire damage.

*Planning for Wildfires*, written by James C. Schwab, AICP, and Stuart Meck, FAICP, examines the feasibility of permitting development in fire-prone areas and how best to design such developments to reduce the risk of damage and loss.

“Wildfire mitigation is extremely important because wildfires are very much a people-triggered hazard, in ways that do not apply to hurricanes, earthquakes, and tornadoes,” said Schwab, Senior Research Associate at APA. “Wildfires also can trigger other serious disasters such as landslides, when rains sweep soil down hills denuded of vegetation.”

Wildfires are increasing in frequency and severity as more people move into areas where developments meet or intermingle with undeveloped wildlands. The buildup of fuels, the previous wildfire strategy of total suppression, historic settlement patterns, and population growth, all contribute to increasing the potential and risk for wildfires. Almost any state can be the scene of a wildfire with the right fuels, the right weather, and a source of ignition.

To help mitigate wildfire damage, Schwab and Meck stress the need for a combined effort from local, state, and federal governments, fire agencies, and residents. “There is no one single approach to dealing with wildfires. Everyone shares in the responsibility to mitigate wildfire damage,” said Meck, Senior Research Fellow at APA. “This includes implementing development design standards to help mitigate fire damage, and engaging and educating residents on their role in preventing wildfire damage.”

The extent of wildfire destruction depends on a number of development decisions, including building design, subdivision design, landscaping and land-use regulations, and management of biological fuel loads. The authors stress the need for building codes that require fire-resistant construction materials such as nonflammable siding (brick, stucco and adobe construction); fire-resistant roofing, eaves, fascias and soffits; and spark arrestors on chimneys.

Residents can play an integral role in mitigating damage by maintaining their property.

They should consistently remove debris to reduce available fuel sources. By maintaining a defensible space around their home and applying recommendations from the national Firewise Communities program for home and landscape maintenance, residents can reduce the likelihood that their home will ignite during a wildfire. Additionally, planners and communities need to examine the risks presented in new development proposals. Siting homes on slopes is one development decision that needs to be carefully considered because of the high associated risk. New developments should be required to have multiple entry routes to prevent residents from becoming trapped and increasing accessibility for emergency responders.

More communities are shifting their focus from responding to disasters to mitigating the impact beforehand through community plans and ordinances. The authors reviewed numerous wildfire mitigation community plans and ordinances. They highlight several effective plans and ordinances in the report, including:

- The Okeechobee County, Florida, Wildland Fire Mitigation Plan, for its unique strategic and institutional approach.
- The Santa Barbara, California, Wildland Fire Plan, as one of the most systematic and clearly written plans reviewed.
- The Ashland, Oregon, Community Wildfire Protection Plan, for its routine scheduling of action items such as conducting wildfire evacuation drills in neighborhoods each year.
- The Clark County, Washington, Wildland Urban Interface/Intermix Ordinance, requiring preventative measures in connection with subdivision, building permits, and other development applications in the interface/intermix area.

The authors note that regardless of the progress communities are making toward mitigating wildfire destruction, all of the plans reviewed lack a clearly delineated relationship to the community's local comprehensive plan. "The local comprehensive plan sets up the overall physical design for the community, including the location of housing, community facilities, transportation, and the intensities and densities of land uses," Meck said. "Wildfire planning can't be at cross purposes with the chief development policies of the community."

"Planners play an integral role in developing communities that foster a safe and enriching environment for residents," said Schwab. "This report should serve as a guide to planners, communities, and residents, to work together to reduce or possibly eliminate the risk associated with wildfires."

*Planning for Wildfires* was underwritten by the National Wildland/Urban Interface Fire Program, a cooperative interagency program operated by the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA).

*Planning for Wildfires* is one of APA's Planning Advisory Service (PAS) Reports. PAS reports analyze current planning practices and offer practical advice that can be implemented in communities around the country. They are designed to serve as a guide for planners, business

leaders, and citizens in creating communities of lasting value.

*Planning for Wildfires* (PAS 529/530) is available for purchase through the American Planning Association for \$60 at [www.planning.org/bookservice](http://www.planning.org/bookservice).

*The American Planning Association and its professional institute, the American Institute of Certified Planners, are dedicated to advancing the art, science and profession of good planning -- physical, economic and social -- so as to create communities that offer better choices for where and how people work and live. Members of APA help create communities of lasting value and encourage civic leaders, business interests and citizens to play a meaningful role in creating communities that enrich people's lives. APA has offices in Washington, D.C., Chicago, Ill., and Shanghai, China. For more information, visit its website at [www.planning.org](http://www.planning.org).*

# # #