LIVING WITH FIRE IN THE WILDLAND URBAN INTERFACE:
A Listening and Understanding Tour of the Oregon Fire Service
August 2019
Partnerships are critical. There is great value in respect for mutual boundaries; however, we all need to recognize the need to work together on this wildfire challenge.

— Chief Jim Watson; Brookings Fire & Rescue

LISTENING TO OREGON COMMUNITIES IMPACTED BY OREGON WILDFIRES:

Confronting the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) Fire Problem in Oregon

Structural fire jurisdictions throughout the state respond to thousands of wildland urban interface (WUI) fires each year. The past several summers demonstrated an amplified risk to Oregonians due to a number of large-scale fires on the landscape. A report released in late 2018 highlighted communities at risk of wildfire in Oregon. These findings through the “Exposure to Human Communities to Wildfire in the Northwest” briefing paper were supported by data released from the U.S. Forest Service (USFS). The risk of WUI fire is anticipated to continue to impact the built environment, increasing the risk to people, property, and the environment.

LISTENING AND UNDERSTANDING:

The Office of State Fire Marshal (OSFM) organized a listening tour to visit eight counties from the southern Oregon coast to the eastern areas of the state. Between February and May 2019, the OSFM met with nearly 120 members of the structural fire service, public safety officers, planners, and local leaders whose communities are at elevated risk of WUI fire. Our conversations took place in:

- Sunriver, February 7
- John Day, April 1
- Hermiston, April 2
- Klamath Falls, April 8
- Grants Pass, April 9
- Brookings, April 10
- Condon, April 23
- Maupin, April 24

The OSFM approached each meeting with clear objectives and the overarching goal of listening to the needs of the fire service regarding their current trends and challenges with WUI fire prevention and mitigation. The OSFM’s objectives were:

• To have realistic discussions about expectations from communities and jurisdictions about how to best address the wildfire threats in the WUI.

• To listen to Oregon fire chiefs, community leaders, and stakeholders about community needs and the challenges and opportunities that the structural fire service faces in relation to WUI fire prevention.

• To evaluate the feedback from the tour to shape collaborative wildland fire prevention efforts and build a model of how a future program could support the needs of the Oregon fire service.

At each meeting, we heard a range of perspectives, which reflected the diversity of the counties’, cities’, and communities’ needs, although similar trends did emerge. This valuable input will contribute to planning, organizing, and building investments to support local fire prevention and response efforts. The ongoing local and county message was clear: an increased unified effort is needed to address the growing wildfire problem that knows no seasonal or jurisdictional boundaries.

**EMERGING THEMES IN WUI PREVENTION:**

Three major themes outlining local fire service needs emerged during the meetings:

**Personnel Capacity:**

• **Provide** personnel resources at the state level to assist local fire service partners with understanding, adopting, and implementing WUI fire codes and standards in communities

• **Facilitate** fire prevention efforts among agencies, jurisdictions, and community groups

• **Support** and coordinate public education and outreach in local communities

**Resource Capacity:**

• **Develop** a coordinated statewide WUI fire plan focusing on at-risk jurisdictions

• **Provide** tools for public education that include coordinated messaging in addressing WUI risk

• **Furnish** and support technology and data to support local planning and response

**Funding Capacity:**

• **Invest** in WUI prevention and response with an eye to long-term solutions

• **Support** prevention and response positions at the local level

• **Invest** in fire prevention activities, including planning, mitigating, educating, and mapping

The majority of conversations centered around the need for a coordinated statewide WUI strategy to develop a program and tools to address the challenges of WUI fire in and near structural fire jurisdictions.
“It is important to remember that fire knows no jurisdictional boundaries. It doesn’t matter where it starts, what matters is who it will impact and how we will handle our communities’ wellness.”

– Chief Robert Palmer; Mid-Columbia Fire & Rescue

LISTENING TOUR LOCATIONS AND LOCAL NEEDS:

Maupin
- Funding Capacity
- Coordinated Efforts
- Codes and Standards

Sunriver
- Partnerships
- Statewide Strategy
- Prevention Capacity

Grants Pass
- Statewide Strategy
- Personnel Capacity
- Coordinated Efforts

Brookings
- Education and Outreach
- Codes and Standards
- Preparedness
Reducing or eliminating the odds of structures igniting will allow the fire forces to become more effective, thus reducing the size of the fires we are now experiencing. It will also reduce the extreme risk that first responders are now facing in trying to save lives and property.

– COMMENT FROM JOHN DAY
DESIRED OUTCOMES TO BEST IMPACT FIRE RISK:

Sunriver, February 7
• Continue to build partnerships across jurisdictional boundaries
• Develop a statewide strategy to coordinate prevention and mitigation messaging and delivery
• Invest in code development, response, and prevention capacity

John Day, April 1
• Create capacity to develop fresh and consistent prevention/mitigation messaging
• Establish WUI specific building codes
• Provide clarity for oversight where jurisdictional authorities are not clear

Hermiston, April 2
• Provide capacity to revitalize fire prevention, including code enforcement
• Recognize different community values at risk and tailor messaging appropriately
• Expand partnerships and explore extended mutual aid

Klamath Falls, April 8
• Create capacity to ensure support from local planning officials and county groups focusing on WUI
• Provide resource guidance on code enforcement and abatement
• Deliver statewide prevention coordination and support with multimedia education through the use of technology

Grants Pass, April 9
• Create personnel capacity to plan and message statewide
• Develop regulatory approaches to address fuels reduction and balance health needs
• Develop relationships among code enforcement and land use planners

Brookings, April 10
• Provide capacity to improve public education and outreach to homeowners to harden homes
• Implement code improvements and provide greater enforcement authority
• Keep preparedness planning current and relevant with an engaged public

Condon, April 23
• Provide capacity for wildland response (equipment and personnel)
• Coordinate with federal and state partners on local response integration
• Obtain funding to contract with suppression resources

Maupin, April 24
• Strengthen interagency relationships and prepare to respond outside of traditional jurisdictions to create a coordinated effort
• Secure funding for wildfire education and coordination and volunteer mobilization
• Provide capacity for greater code enforcement, including burn bans
THE WAY FORWARD:

WUI fires will remain an increased risk, with the impacts felt by all Oregonians. Demands on the fire service continue to rise, and a holistic approach from the Oregon fire service and our partners can address the problem if provided increased capacity to handle the growing issue. The Oregon fire service oversees critical prevention, mitigation, and suppression tactics and is positioned to address them.

Smoke has clouded the skies over Oregon the past several summers, and more residents and visitors understand the challenges Oregon faces in addressing health, safety, prevention, preparedness, mitigation, and response interventions for the growing wildfire problem. Increased population in our state, changes to housing density, and the expansion of homes and communities into the WUI must all be considerations for addressing the WUI risk and prevention and mitigation aspects.

Conversations highlighted the need for increased capacity, additional prevention tools and resources, code creation and enforcement, and committed funding to address the growing threat of WUI fires in and near Oregon’s communities. The feedback provided in the listening and understanding tour is instrumental as the OSFM evaluates common threads and develops strategies and tactics that can address the WUI risk and the unique challenge it presents. With significant population growth in the WUI, there is a need for additional capacity to assist our partner agencies, including the Oregon Department of Forestry and the local fire service, with assisting and certifying home owners in meeting and maintaining defensible space around their homes.

The OSFM proposes to address the WUI prevention and mitigation needs identified by the fire service through coordinated, locally positioned staffing dedicated to community risk reduction. The OSFM will initially seek funding for four regionally-based, risk reduction specialists who can focus on the identified needs, working specifically in the areas designated most at-risk from wildfire. These individuals would help form and support strong local partnerships. These specialists would create and distribute appropriate prevention and mitigation messaging and outreach, work with local agencies to apply for and administer grant funds, and establish and enforce WUI codes by collaborating with building officials and community leaders.

Phase 2

The OSFM will continue to engage with partners to ensure the WUI risk is addressed. While an initial tour was completed based on data from the USFS and National Fire Incident Reporting System in high-risk areas, we recognize many communities are ready to address risk locally and have been impacted historically by fire. Additionally, the Governor’s Council on Wildfire Response is anticipated to have recommendations from three committees on Mitigation, Suppression, and Recovery by September 30, 2019. The OSFM will continue into Phase 2 to engage in active conversations (with the fire service in northwest Oregon), tribal partners (throughout the state), and other partners to best address the WUI risk in Oregon during fall/winter 2019.

2 See oregon.gov/gov/policy/Pages/wildfirecouncil.aspx.