

Berkeley Township, New Jersey

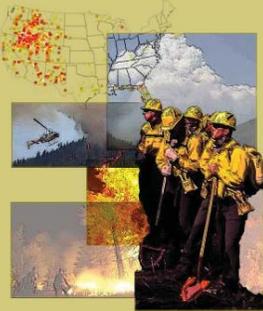
Steps to Improve

Community Preparedness for Wildfire

Community Preparedness Case Study Series

Case Study #8

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Berkeley Township, New Jersey

Berkeley Township, located in central Ocean County, New Jersey, is shaped like a bow tie, with the Garden State Parkway (GSP) running through the knot. On the eastern side of the tie are ocean beaches. On the other side are the Pine Barrens of the Pinelands National Reserve, managed by the New Jersey Pinelands Commission and the National Park Service. This pine/scrub oak ecosystem is fire dependent, with approximately 1,500 wildfires occurring each year.



Many factors have increased the risk of wildfire in Berkeley Township. The mosaic of private-, State-, and county-owned lands fragments the landscape, challenging efforts in wildfire management. The New Jersey Pinelands Commission has sought to balance growth and development while conserving forest land. There has been an increase in people moving into the pine barrens of Berkeley Township from northern New Jersey and New York. In addition, from 1998 to 2002, a severe drought heightened the fire danger. As a result, wildland-urban interface issues have increased. During this period, two major wildfires threatened homes and lives, bringing fire to the community's attention. Agencies at all levels are now working together to fight fires and are organizing with citizens to increase public awareness and reduce fuels.

Keys to wildfire preparedness in Berkeley Township

Create a Fire Safe Committee

Berkeley Township west of the GSP has several retirement housing developments. In 1997, a fire rapidly approached these developments, within 50 feet. Although no lives or homes were lost, residents began to wonder what would happen with the next fire. Conversations among citizens and local government officials sparked the creation of the Fire Safe Committee, modeled after a program in California. The committee serves as a vehicle for educating people and focusing resources and organizations around common initiatives. The activities of the committee are ongoing—not just focused on single campaigns. For example, committee members publish brochures and pamphlets for the public and talk to local neighborhood associations and school groups about wildfire preparedness. Stakeholders involved include City Hall employees, Volunteer Fire Companies (VFCs), organized citizen groups, and the State Forest Fire Service.

Educate through neighborhood associations

Many people mentioned the importance of wildfire education in Berkeley Township. In one person's opinion, "education is the biggest nut to crack." Neighborhood associations are plentiful and strong throughout the nine retirement housing



<http://www.nps.gov/pine/>



developments. During the recent wildfires, the VFCs used these organized groups to communicate important information, such as evacuation routes. The associations continue talking about wildfire preparedness by holding meetings, publishing newsletters, and organizing activities for residents.

Know your populations and their unique challenges

Citizens are concerned about different wildfire issues. For example, senior citizens may be fearful during a wildfire and feel trapped in their homes, especially if they depend on medical machines. In addition, many of these residents are on medication and may forget them during an evacuation. In response to these unique challenges, the neighborhood associations organized a database that lists each resident and his/her medications. In Berkeley Township, elderly residents were also concerned about welfare of their pets. One female resident recognized this concern and helped create a mobile pet trailer, which is used during evacuations.

Use knowledge of local firefighters

One unique feature of Berkeley Township is the interest and concern of the volunteer firefighters in wildfire management. Many of them are retired structural firefighters who have moved here from other parts of New Jersey. However, they are not familiar with the forested landscape or wildland firefighting. The State Forest Fire Service and the VFCs have begun training together in simulated exercises and field drills. Using local firefighters' knowledge and concern, the VFCs raise public awareness by hosting open houses and visiting local schools during Fire Prevention Week.



Gain political support

Wildfire is on the political agenda in Berkeley Township. The current mayor is effective and able to speak to the diverse population. He recognizes the importance of increasing public awareness and has taken an active role in creating and supporting the Fire Safe Committee. City Hall initiatives include giving employees time to work on wildfire preparedness, volunteering for State Forest Fire Service programs, and forming collaborative partnerships for wildland firefighting. No opportunity goes unused; even Berkeley Township's recent tax letter included information about wildfire.

What's Next for Berkeley Township?

People we talked to in Berkeley Township suggested several activities that would help residents maintain or improve wildfire preparedness.

Increase public awareness

The community is experiencing an influx of new residents. Unfortunately, many of these folks associate the area with the seashore and do not know about its fire-prone ecosystem. The area's diverse population and range of incomes may require several outreach methods. Although it is easier to reach out to the western side of Berkeley Township through neighborhood associations, the message must also reach homeowners on the eastern side of the township where community groups are not as plentiful.

Unify and strengthen VFCs

In Berkeley Township, there are three separate VFCs. Recently, an administrator was hired to organize human resources and equipment and to promote coordinated efforts among these VFCs. During a fire in 2002, these VFCs worked side-by-side under a unified command system. However, turnover is an issue for these fire departments. Membership did increase after the events of September 11, 2001, but sustaining this membership is the issue. Officials are researching the Length of Service Award Program (LOSAP), also found in other states, to provide benefits to volunteer firefighters in exchange for their years of service.



Work together to manage fuel loads

Due to the patchwork of land ownership, many agencies are responsible for managing the pine barrens ecosystem. The State Forest Fire Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service use prescribed burns on more than 20,000 public acres each year to mitigate the fuel loads. Although the N.J. Pinelands Commission has preservation and conservation interests, it does not have resources to manage forested lands under its authority. The next step is to investigate the possibilities for State Forest Fire Service assistance in developing a fuels treatment plan. Private property owners also need to become part of the management partnership. A critical barrier to overcome is homeowner liability for prescribed burns. Assessments and prescribed burning are costly, partially due to the insurance needs. In response, some homeowners would like to be covered under State liability insurance, using funds for prescribed burns through the National Fire Plan.



Sustain interest between wildfires

Wildfire is on the minds of people after a crisis occurs, but it needs to remain there, even in quiet times. Berkeley Township's Fire Safe Committee is an excellent forum to keep people talking about wildfire preparedness; in fact, a new issue is discussed at each meeting. The committee will need to respond to the diversity of citizen concerns to maintain commitment from all sectors of society.

Preparing for Wildfire: Lessons for Other Communities from Berkeley Township

1. Remember that fire is repetitive. It is going to happen again.
2. Organize a common list of contacts and phone numbers to keep the network strong.
3. Gain community and political support. Form a committee to address wildfire issues and organize efforts to increase preparedness.
4. Tackle vegetation management with multiple landowners. It's not easy but it's necessary.



Web Sites for More Information on Berkeley Township and Wildfire Preparedness

Berkeley Township: www.berkeleytownship.org

Ocean County: www.co.ocean.nj.us

New Jersey Forest Fire Service: www.state.nj.us/dep/forestry

New Jersey Pinelands Commission: www.state.nj.us/pinelands

National Park Service—New Jersey Pinelands: www.nps.gov/pine/

New Jersey Pine Barrens: www.pineypower.com

North Central Research Station: www.ncrs.fs.fed.us/

Firewise: www.firewise.org



N.J. Forest Fire Service



N.J. Forest Fire Service

Unless otherwise noted, all photos are by Lang and Nelson, University of Minnesota.

The Wildfire Preparedness Project of the National Fire Plan

Communities across the U.S. have voiced increasing concern about how they can better prepare for wildfire. Even in areas of the country not traditionally thought of as having high fire risk, storms, changing climate, and pest/disease outbreaks have increased concern about the potential for catastrophic fire. In areas where fire is viewed as a natural part of the ecosystem, the fact that more and more people choose these places to live in means that there is a potential for major fire impacts. A team of scientists funded by the National Fire Plan have been visiting communities across the country to identify the activities communities are undertaking to increase wildfire preparedness, and the resources necessary to support these activities. The project is led by the North Central Research Station, in cooperation with the Pacific Northwest Research Station, University of Florida, University of Minnesota, and Southern Oregon University.

This is the first in a series of summaries reflecting findings of the case studies. Hard copies of this summary can be obtained from the individuals listed below. All case study summaries currently available can be found on the Web at:

www.ncrs.fs.fed.us/4803/Highlights.htm

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