

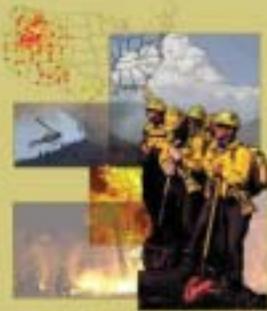
The Colville Reservation

Steps to Improve Community Preparedness for Wildfire

Community Preparedness Case Study Series

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The Colville Reservation

The Colville Reservation encompasses nearly 1.4 million acres in northeastern Washington State. It is land shaped by glaciers with elevations ranging from 790 to 6,774 feet. The summers are hot and dry, with most of the precipitation falling as snow in the mountains. The Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, a sovereign nation recognized by the Federal Government, is made up of 12 bands with an enrollment of around 8,700 members. Established in 1872, the reservation consists of land held in Federal trust for the Confederated Tribes, land owned by individual tribal members, and land owned by non-tribal members. Several hundred tribal members are employed at three casinos and in forest and resource management. The reservation has had various timber product industries since the 1920s, with many tribal members currently employed in forestry jobs.



Before the 1900s, tribal members used fire to maintain understory plants such as huckleberry, serviceberry, and others valued by the tribes. But the suppression of fire over the past 100 years has altered the landscape. Accumulated dead wood in stands of ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir, lodgepole pine, and western larch leaves these sites more susceptible to fire than they were historically. Residential areas are now nestled in forests with high fire risk, increasing potential loss of resources and human life if a fire occurs. In response to this risk, the Mt. Tolman Fire Center was located near Keller in the southeastern portion of the reservation. Operating out of the fire center, Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) employees work with tribal employees in an integrated program of forestry and fire management.



Traditionally, tribal members used fire to maintain understory plants such as huckleberry.



The Colville Reservation in northeastern Washington covers nearly 1.4 million acres of ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir, lodgepole pine, and western larch. (Photo: V. Sturtevant)



Two reservation fires in 2001 caught residents' attention when 40,000 acres were burned and many homes were lost. In 2003, arsonists may have set at least 11 fires on the Colville Reservation, burning approximately 3,000 acres. The largest of these, the McGinnis Flats fire, burned 2,200 acres, cost \$4.7 million for fire suppression, and resulted in the death of a firefighter in a helicopter crash. In response to these arson fires, the Colville Confederated Tribes and Mt. Tolman Fire Center staff asked the Washington State Prevention Team for help in reducing arson.

Keys to Wildfire Preparedness

Create Defensible Space

Working through the Wildland Urban Interface Program of BIA Fire Management and drawing on National Fire Plan funds, the reservation established a defensible space program. The Mt. Tolman Fire Center sent letters to residents to solicit participants in the program. Center employees visited interested homeowners and conducted property evaluations to determine what could be done to create more defensible space. They documented the number and location of structures, utilities, fuel storage, water availability, distance of vegetation from structures, and points of access. Structures were photographed and mapped, and information was downloaded into a central database. Before leaving homeowners' properties, center employees made recommendations for actually getting the work done.

The program has completed work on several properties including pruning limbs, removing small trees, cutting brush, and hand piling or chipping slash. With the support of residents, the tribe and BIA have been able to initiate small prescribed burns near residential areas as part of their fuels reduction program. The visibility of these projects, and the willingness of crews to talk about what they are doing, have helped residents better understand fire conditions and efforts to reduce risk. This has increased their trust and willingness to participate in the program.

Reduce Arson Fires

The objective of the reservation's arson prevention strategy is to reduce property loss from arson-caused wildfires. To accomplish this objective, the Washington State Prevention Team developed the following key messages:

- Arson is a crime. People should report any suspicious activity related to fires by calling the 1-800 number or 911 if the crime is in progress.
- Arson hurts more than trees.
- Arson costs more than tax dollars.
- Wildland arson fires are dangerous to firefighters and the public.
- Everyone needs to be responsible and obey local restrictions.
- Property owners can take action to reduce their risk from wildfires.

The team has used several communication tools including news releases to media outlets and other key contacts, public service announcements, and posters. It developed and distributed flyers to raise awareness of the arson problem and to inform the public of fire restrictions. Billfold-size tip cards with information on the program and contact information were developed and over 1,400 were distributed. More than 1,776 people were contacted and given prevention materials. Residents and the media have been very supportive of the prevention team's efforts.



A number of tools have been developed to reduce arson on the reservation. (Photo: V. Sturtevant)



In 2002 arsons were responsible for the McGinnis Flats fire that burned 2,200 acres and resulted in the death of a helicopter pilot fighting the blaze. (Photo: V. Sturtevant)



Integrate Forest Management and Fuels Reduction

Forest management districts on the reservation were reorganized with each district responsible for a number of management activities, including those that support fuels reduction, for example, contracts requiring loggers to clean up following a harvest help reduce fire hazard. The fuels staff, logistics staff, and operations staff coordinate their efforts rather than operate independently. Because prescribed burning and active forest management are accepted as tribal cultural practices, they were embraced by local residents and elders as a way to protect homes from wildfire.

What's Next for the Colville Reservation?

There is no national program to guide management for reservation lands. Each reservation operates independently. Although this allows for innovation and development of specific approaches oriented to local conditions and needs, it often results in one tribe wrestling with an issue another tribe has already resolved. Better communication among tribes could result in mutual learning that could benefit all. Some common reservation problems cannot be resolved locally; for example, private holdings within the reservation are not covered by tribal regulation and may not be covered by State regulation either. This uncertain situation has created a challenge for tribal resource managers.



A thinning project in the town of Keller helps create defensible space on land adjacent to homes. (Photo: V. Sturtevant)

An effort to document and share oral history around the use of fire is needed. With burning regulations, permits, and burning plan requirements, people have stopped practicing traditional burns and taking personal responsibility for the fires they start. Consequently, much of the traditional knowledge around the use of fire has been lost.

The Mt. Tolman Fire Center is continuing efforts to document structures and hazards such as fuel tanks and to clear defensible space around as many dwellings as possible. Center employees are also using small prescribed burns to reduce fuel loading. They hope that policies at the national level will set the stage for developing cogeneration plants that could use chips and other waste from clearing and harvest activities.

Wildfire Preparedness Lessons for Other Communities

1. Ask for help. When several suspicious fires occurred on the reservation, the Colville Confederated Tribes and Mt. Tolman Fire Staff called in the Washington State Prevention Team to help reduce arson fires.
2. Help community members understand and accept the need for prescribed burns.
3. Think about and visualize what you want the forest or area to look like, plan how to achieve that vision, and take steps to make it happen.
4. Take advantage of windows of opportunity, such as a fair in a neighboring community, rodeos, or homeowner association meetings to get people thinking about defensible space, evacuation plans, and other aspects of preparedness.
5. Combine communication about defensible space and preparedness for wildfire with information about arson. People need to know how to help prevent arson and how to be prepared in case of a natural fire.
6. Start talking with students in the elementary schools about the use of fire, costs associated with arson, defensible space, and preparedness. Send information packets home with children through the schools.
7. The local indigenous culture had a history of using fire and could relate to prescribed burning as a traditional practice. Agency culture at the Mt. Tolman Fire Center (both the BIA and tribal employees) was more supportive of fieldwork packaged as fuels reduction rather than as protecting residential areas.
8. Be creative! The Colville Reservation uses its employee phone system to broadcast messages that reach all tribal employees. Employees then spread the information to other community members.



Material removed during a thinning project will be burned to further reduce hazardous fuels. (Photo V. Sturtevant)

Web Sites for More Information about Colville and Wildfire Preparedness

USDA Forest Service – Colville National Forest: www.fs.fed.us/r6/colville/

Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation: www.colvilletribes.com

National Fire Plan: www.fireplan.gov



A local crew gathers to conduct prescribed burning on the reservation. (Photo: V. Sturtevant)

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 to identify 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 one 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

For more information contact:

Linda Kruger
Pacific Northwest
Research Station
907 586-8811 X 240
lkruger@fs.fed.us



Victoria Sturtevant
Southern Oregon
University
541 552-6439
sturtevant@sou.edu