

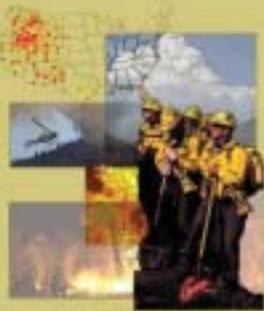
# Wedgefield, Florida

## Steps to Improve Community Preparedness for Wildfire

### Community Preparedness Case Study Series

### Case Study #15

June 2004



### Wedgefield, Florida

Wedgefield, Florida, is a small subdivision located just 23 miles east of downtown Orlando. Initially called Rocket City and sometimes referred to as Cape Orlando, this subdivision was originally intended for employees of NASA, and the area grew rapidly in the 1960s. Today, Wedgefield is a bedroom community of 2,700 people spread over 6,500 acres serving Titusville's space program, Orlando, and other parts of Orange County. Although development in Orlando is quickly moving toward Wedgefield, the community is currently surrounded by undeveloped land.



This area has a history of periodic wildfires. When development began in Wedgefield, fire was suppressed, leading to an accumulation of heavy fuel loads and an increased risk of wildfires. In 1998, significant wildfires approached Wedgefield from the north and east. Many residents were evacuated from their homes. If the wind direction had not changed at the last moment, the community would have suffered devastating losses. These fires were a wake-up call for the citizen's of Wedgefield, alerting them to the risk of wildfire and setting the stage for preventative actions.

The geographic location of Wedgefield adds to its risk of catastrophic wildfires. Surrounded by a large ranch, State Road 520, and a county park, Wedgefield is a residential island isolated from the rest of developed Orange County. The nearest fire station is 8 minutes away. If a brush fire were to break out in the wooded areas in or around Wedgefield, help might not arrive in time and the fire might not be contained.

The Wedgefield subdivision is divided into four sections: the City, consisting of 1/4-acre plots; the Estate, consisting of 1- to 5-acre lots or homesites; the Village, consisting of condominiums; and the Reserve, a gated community. Although wildfire is not likely to break out in the City, with its manicured grass lawns, there is a much higher risk in the Estates area. There, many homes are built close to flammable saw palmettos and pine trees or next to unmanaged vacant lots.

After the 1998 fires, State and county agencies began steps to reduce the risk of wildfires in several communities. In April 2001, a wildfire risk assessment team composed of Division of Forestry (DOF), Orange County Fire Rescue (OCFR), Division of Emergency Management (DEM), and local homeowners carried out a wildfire hazard assessment in Wedgefield. The assessment placed Wedgefield into the high hazard category. Based on this, Wedgefield was invited to become a pilot community in the National FireWise program. A FireWise Mitigation Board was formed, comprised of homeowners and at least one member from the DOF, DEM, OCFR, Orange County Planning Division, Orange County Cooperative Extension, Orange County Emergency Management, St. John's River Management District, and the Ranger Drainage District (RDD).

◀ *A series of drainage ditches running throughout the community also provide fuel breaks in case of wildfire. Photo courtesy of Ranger Drainage District.*



Many regard Wedgefield as the most active and the most successful FireWise community in the Nation. The board continues to meet regularly and has received several awards and recognition for its efforts to make Wedgefield better prepared for wildfire. Other communities facing a similar risk may learn much from Wedgefield's actions.

## What Makes FireWise Successful in Wedgefield?

### Knowledge of risk

Long-time residents of Wedgefield and Orange County have experienced several wildfires and are aware of the risk. But wildfires became an even bigger issue in the area in 1998, when many homes were evacuated as severe wildfires approached. This experience made residents more accepting of wildfire education programs and more apt to implement preparedness principles, such as clearing vegetation around their homes to create defensible space, on their own property. One particular challenge has been getting the word out to new residents, who may have never experienced wildfire. In the absence of direct experience, the FireWise committee has relied on educational initiatives to alert the community about the risk of wildfire and to teach them general preparedness principles. The committee has put together educational material, consisting of a FireWise brochure, pamphlets from the fire department and DOF, and other pertinent information, which is distributed by the RDD to new homeowners in Wedgefield.



*Unmanaged lots and homes build next to trees increase the risk of wildfire in Wedgefield.*



*Wedgefield's FireWise committee meets regularly to discuss issues related to wildfire preparedness.*

### Leadership

Strong and capable leadership has played a vital role in the success of FireWise in Wedgefield. Members of the FireWise committee contribute what they can in light of their capacity. The FireWise committee chair, who is also a resident of Wedgefield and a real estate agent, keeps the group intact by scheduling regular meetings and keeping open communication lines among the entire group. Her knowledge of real estate laws makes her a valuable asset to the committee, and her membership in many clubs and committees in Wedgefield provides a link between FireWise and the community.

She has been instrumental in bringing FireWise concepts to the Codes and Covenants Committee of the Wedgefield subdivision, such as setting a minimum gate width so that emergency vehicles have easier access to homes. The RDD, whose 10,000 acres includes the community of Wedgefield, has played an important role in promoting the FireWise effort in Wedgefield. RDD serves as Wedgefield's only governing body, and the community looks to it for answers. The manager of the RDD is an active member of the FireWise board, with an efficient and often creative strategy for getting things accomplished. For example, he has held several Demonstration Days, when equipment vendors come to Wedgefield and demonstrate their equipment by clearing or mowing a fuel break. The representative of the Orange County Planning Commission acts as a liaison between the county and the FireWise committee and provides the board with county information, such as what grants are available and how to apply for those grants. DOF representatives were instrumental in getting FireWise to Wedgefield initially and are in charge of creating the mitigation plan in and around Wedgefield. They also carry out the yearly fire-risk assessments in the community.

### Teamwork

In addition to able leadership, the success of wildfire preparedness initiatives in Wedgefield is also due to teamwork. Agencies that serve Wedgefield have good working relationships with each other. When conducting prescribed burns, the DOF often gets additional equipment from OCFR and assistance from the St. John's River Management District. When brush fire breaks out, OCFR and DOF work together to suppress it. While the RDD maintains fuel breaks within Wedgefield, it has also worked with DOF and St. John's River Management District to conduct prescribed burns on the perimeter of the community's borders to reduce fuel loads. Agency cooperation was also evident in the fire-risk assessments performed in Wedgefield: DOF and County departments such as utilities and fire and rescue all lent their expertise to perform an accurate detailed assessment of homes in the area.



*Equipment vendors often demonstrate their equipment by clearing a fuel break.*

### **Piggyback on community events**

Although community events typically have a good turnout in Wedgefield, at one time few residents attended FireWise meetings. Members of the FireWise committee decided to piggyback on some popular community events as a way to get their message out. They set up informational booths, distributed educational material, and displayed firefighting equipment at community gatherings, such as picnics, yard sales, and golf tournaments. The Homeowners' Association (HOA) in Wedgefield is active throughout the entire community, and FireWise contributes articles to the HOA monthly newsletter. FireWise has sent guest speakers to Wedgefield's HOA and Garden Club meetings. Recently, FireWise collaborated with Wedgefield's popular Garden Club to promote FireWise-approved landscaping plants. Additionally, FireWise hosted a Fire Awareness Day at a nearby home improvement store, where they displayed a cabin landscaped with FireWise plants and handed out FireWise literature.

### **National prestige**

National prestige and awards have helped keep FireWise going by boosting the morale of the board and encouraging community participation. The board members have waged an aggressive campaign in promoting FireWise and have been duly rewarded. Wedgefield is now a designated "FireWise Community USA." Wedgefield and the FireWise board have received several awards—two at the national level from the National FireWise Communities/USA, one from Orange County for their tireless efforts to reduce the community's risk to wildfires, and one from FLASH (Federal Alliance for Safe Homes), recognizing their commitment to wildfire education. More recently, two members of the FireWise board received plaques from the Florida DOF in recognition of their efforts. The board has also received donations from supportive contractors and builders in Wedgefield.



*The Wedgefield FireWise committee has received several awards for their dedication in raising wildfire awareness in the community. Photo courtesy of Ranger Drainage District.*

### **What's Next for Wedgefield?**

Today, the success of the FireWise program is a result of diligent work by the agencies and local leaders involved. More and more residents are participating in FireWise events, and many homeowners are using FireWise principles when managing their lots. Some builders are even clearing vegetation around homes before homeowners move in.

Of course, wildfire preparedness is a process, not a product, and Wedgefield needs to continue taking steps. Educational efforts need to continue to reach the wider community, especially new residents moving into Wedgefield. OCFR recently received approval to hire a full-time educational specialist who will serve on the FireWise board and help educate Wedgefield and other at-risk communities about wildfire education, grant opportunities, and other fire-related topics. Mitigation activities need to be implemented within the community. Prescribed burning has traditionally been carried out along the perimeter of the community, but due to recent legislation, DOF will be able to conduct mitigation activities on unmanaged lots including those owned by absentee landowners. The RDD hopes to open up some easements to create fuel breaks within Wedgefield. It also hopes to buy a piece of equipment to mow and maintain these fuel breaks.



*An example of a house in Wedgefield practicing FireWise principles.*

### **Preparing for Wildfire: Lessons for Other Communities from Wedgefield**

- Assess the risk in your community with help from forestry and fire department officials.
- Request a FireWise workshop for your community. Invite civic leaders, agencies, builders, developers, and real estate agents.
- Select able leaders. Involve a mix of State, county, and local agencies in the preparedness process.

- Piggyback on events, such as yard sales and golf tournaments, to educate residents about wildfire. Keep your message in front of homeowners by attending community events and contributing to newsletter articles and mailings.
- Review codes and covenants for opportunities to mandate FireWise strategies.

## Web Sites for More Information about Wedgefield and Wildfire Preparedness

Wedgefield: <http://www.qualityapps.com/Contents/CommunityGuide/Florida/WedgefieldOnline/>

FireWise Communities: <http://www.firewise.org/usa/>

Orange County Fire Rescue: <http://www.orangecountyfl.net/ocfrd/default.htm>

Florida Division of Forestry: <http://www.fl-dof.com/>

Orange County Cooperative Extension: <http://www.orange.ifas.ufl.edu/>

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



*A sign at the entrance to Wedgefield alerts people to the risk of wildfire.*

Unless otherwise noted, photos are from Shruti Agrawal and Martha Monroe, University of Florida.

## 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 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](http://www.ncrs.fs.fed.us/4803/Highlights.htm)

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