

## NW Regional RC&D--- A WHITEFISH SUCCESS STORY IN DEVELOPING COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS

For the past five years, Northwest Regional (NWR) RC&D has played a pivotal role in helping the community of Whitefish, Montana develop a more organized approach to addressing the risks that wildfires pose to this fire prone area. What initially began as a traditional project to help landowners obtain small grants for individual fuels reduction projects, evolved into a coalition of collaborative partnerships centered on a common goal of reducing and managing wildfire risks to Whitefish and its watersheds. Throughout this process, in concert with many others, NWR RC&D provided expertise, incentives, and leadership that helped make these collaborative partnerships possible.

By way of background, Whitefish, Montana is a town of approximately 10,000 situated just west of the Rocky Mountains and Glacier National Park in the northwest corner of Montana; and is located within a known fire dependent ecosystem. During the summer of 2003, people became more aware of this fact as ashes from the Brush Creek fire, ten miles to the west of Whitefish, actually landed within the community. Once the smoke cleared, nearly 100,000 acres had burned.



The Brush Creek fire reminded everyone of their vulnerability to wildfire. Following the fire seasons of 2003 and 2004, the Whitefish area communities of Elkhorn and Suncrest applied for, and received, National Fire Plan Grant Money that was administered through NWR RC&D. NWR RC&D foresters met with landowners about individual fuels reduction projects and began the process of educating various communities about importance of creating defensible space around homes and communities. Communities became officially recognized as “firewise” by FirewiseUSA and started to look at ways that neighboring communities could work together. Elkhorn has continued its efforts in this regard and has now been recognized as a FirewiseUSA community for the past five years.

Over time, the group of Whitefish residents began to meet with public and private entities to develop a more coordinated approach to addressing wildfire risks. The Whitefish Area Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) was completed and the group eventually became involved with FireSafe Montana and, in 2009, formed the Whitefish Area Fire Safe Council (WAFSC). In June 2009, WAFSC helped sponsor a day-long “Living With Wildfire” and “Firefighter Appreciation” event in Whitefish in collaboration with USFS, Montana DNRC, NWR RC&D, local fire departments, and fuels reduction contractors. The public/private partnerships that resulted continue to this day with various projects currently in the works, including a “Map Your Neighborhood” project and a plan to develop a network of “firewise” communities.

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