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Prescribed Fires at the Wildland-Urban Interface: Policy and Citizen Concern

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Twelve of the eighteen most devastating wildfires in the history of Texas occurred in 2011. The Bastrop County Complex fire stood out as the worst in Texas history, destroying 1,649 homes (Breal et al., 2011). Two decades ago, urban homeowners did not recognize the potential danger of wildland fires (Gardner et al., 1987). Dramatic events such as the 2011 Texas fires led to a turning point at which people began to recognize the complex problems of ever-increasing wildfires in the wildland-urban interface. Decades of fire suppression policies led to a build-up of wildland undergrowth vegetation fire loads adjacent to urban homes, spelling disaster if ignited (Miller & Wade, 2003). It was clear that a change in fire policy was needed.



Flames from 2011 Bastrop Complex Fire creep toward house.
Photo credit: <http://photoblog.statesman.com/tag/central-texas-fires>

Increasingly, homes are being built in the wildland-urban interface. In the 1990s, California, Oregon and Washington saw a 61% or 1,039,344 units of new homes built in this interface despite the risk of fire (Hammer et al., 2007). While homeowners can fireproof homes and clear vegetation in a buffer perimeter around their homes, an effective way to prevent devastating fires is through natural resource agency fire management and routine prescribed burning in wildlands. Prescribed fires reduce property damage risk due to wildfires and restore balance to ecological systems (Winter & Fried, 2000). However, the public sees fire as a safety and legal liability (Toledo et al., 2012). As a result, fire policies



Resident uses shovels and garden hose to try to stop the fires from destroying his home. Bastrop, 2011.

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favor caution and address secondary concerns such as smoke management in urban areas (Twidwell et al., 2013). This results in what has been called the “knowing-doing” gap (Costanza et al., 2013).

In the late 2000s few county officials or local fire departments in Central Texas endorsed prescribed burning. The Bastrop fires caused officials to take notice of the need for prescribed burns, and for burns on a more frequent, planned schedule. To manage fire, you need fire. However, local fire

departments lacked prescribed burn training. In December 2012, the City of Austin Fire Department created a Wildfire Division (Harmon, 2013). Since then, the division has had two prescribed burns with the intent to both restore ecological balance to the burned areas and to offer firefighters training and skills in wildfire mitigation (Miller, 2013). Travis County and the City of Austin are developing a Community Wildfire Protection Plan that they hope will lead to recognition as a Fire-Adapted Community (Austin, 2013).



Filling the gap between the fear of fire and the need for fire will take a good bit of public education and careful changes in training and policy, most effective on a local level, that hopefully will lead to public acceptance and public support of new practices and policies (DeBano, L. F. et al., 1998).

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