

Wildland Urban Interface

What is it, how did it get here, and what do we do about it?

What is it?

The National Wildland/Urban Interface Fire Protection Program originally used the term “interface” in a generic way to describe any area where potentially dangerous combustible fuels were found adjacent to combustible homes and other structures.

As uncontrolled fires in these wildland/urban interface areas became more of a concern to fire protection agencies and affected residents, the term had to be more precise in its definition.

The National Fire Protection Agency (NFPA) 299, *Standard for Protection of Life and Property from Wildfire*, 1991 edition, defined wildland/urban interface as “an area where development and wildland fuels meet at a well defined boundary.” Whereas wildland/urban intermix is “an area where development and wildland fuels meet with no clear boundary.”

Though many equate wildland fires to the western United States, the potential for devastating fires exist in all states and can affect communities of any size. Interface fire problems *are* different in various parts of the country. The Pineywoods of East Texas are vastly different from the sloping California hillsides covered in chaparral, but both can threaten nearby homeowners.

How did it get here?

Wildland/urban interface areas exist wherever homes are nestled among trees and other combustible vegetation. These areas are increasing in number for very simple reasons: usually these areas offer such traits as scenic beauty, economy, and escape from the pressures of city lifestyles. These advantages of interface living have been enough to generate and sustain a significant population shift from urban living to increased living among the forests and wildlands.

The scope of the problem first reached wide national attention in 1985, when wildland fires across the country damaged or destroyed 1,400 homes. It became clear that most homeowners who were moving to the scenic interface were not fully aware that they were living with increased risks of fire.

Whose problem is it?

Fire protection in interface areas is not the responsibility of any single agency. When wildland/urban interface fires occur, community services are strained; natural resources, homes, and precious family possessions are destroyed; and jobs, civic pride and even lives can be lost.

Joint effort is the only way to cut down on this type of devastating fire. Fire management personnel must combine forces with home/land owners, civic groups, and even insurance companies must all work together to defeat this problem. Planning interface fire protection cannot be left to “the other guy.” Each level of government, and ultimately each citizen, shares the responsibility for both fire protection and fire prevention.

What can we do about it?

Better public education is the key element in improving these interface situations. The first task is to define who your target audience is, then comes the most difficult task of getting their attention.

Ultimately, it takes action to change public attitudes and behavior regarding fire safety. There is no single answer or approach that will produce perfect fire safety in every community under all conditions. Good planning is essential, but eventually those plans must be translated into programs that are implemented and coordinated to keep them on target.