

## Community wildfire mitigation is more important than ever!

By Pam Leschak, USFS National Program Manager FAC and WUI

Who would have imagined, as we grow wildfire mitigation programs and get work done on the ground, that we'd have the added challenge of a pandemic. But the pandemic won't stop wildfire; communities will face wildfire and smoke threats as they always do.

It's unclear how the current situation will impact wildfire response but it is clear that community wildfire mitigation before wildfire hits is more important than ever. It's critically important property owners, who are spending more time at home, make use of the time they have now to prepare their properties for wildfire. That mitigation will help protect their homes but it will also reduce the burden on firefighters and challenges they might face during fire season.

We know face-to-face engagement is the best way to move people to change behavior or take the action on the ground to reduce wildfire risk. Technology (Zoom, Teams, Google Hangout, etc) means we can still communicate face-to-face even if we're working from home. We, as wildfire mitigation professionals, can still help property owners take action through personal (electronic) contact.

- Hold *virtual* meetings with high risk neighborhoods or communities to talk about what they can do and how you can help them harden homes or create defensible space.
- Contact people who've had home assessments done and a) ask them what they've been able to accomplish and b) urge them to take action now. If they need help, advise them over the phone, get them in line for cost share funding, or put them in touch with local contractors.
- Hold *virtual* meetings with mitigation partners to solidify relationships, plan next steps,, and develop safe ways to get mitigation done now. Folks aren't traveling as much so many are more available.
- Develop (with partners) protocols for meeting with residents and doing site visits in accordance with social distancing guidance. I heard of a resident in his home who FaceTime'd with a mitigation specialist doing a home site visit on the property. Once the walk-around was done she e-mailed the mitigation plan to him and he started working on it the next day. Focus only on doing home assessments where a) there is high wildfire risk and b) the resident will follow up immediately with action.
- Steer people to contractors who are still doing work but are social distancing.
- Build your volunteer cadre (some folks might have some time on their hands) to help do home site visits, write grants, shepherd cost share requests through the system, track mitigation accomplishments in high risk areas, talk with neighbors (electronically or at a distance) about creating defensible space and hardening homes before wildfire's start.
- Urge residents in your jurisdiction to consider where they might go if they have to evacuate. Many of the usual options may not be available for some time.
- Urge residents in your jurisdiction to a) take time for mitigation now and b) be very careful not to cause wildfires.

Fire season will be here one way or another. We can plan and do or we can wait and see. Let's be the doers. Let me know what great projects (home hardening, defensible space, and hazardous fuel reduction) your communities are undertaking during these interesting times to reduce community risk.