



ON THE LINE

Wildfire and Rural Poverty: Disastrous Connections

“Poverty, in the context of wildfires, means people and communities unable, because of inadequate financial or nonfinancial resources, to take the steps necessary to protect themselves, their families, their homes, and other assets from the risks of wildfire.” (*Wildfire and Poverty Report*, 2001)

The financial and social costs of wildfires are rising annually. Between 2000 and 2002, wildfires destroyed almost 4,000 structures nationwide and cost the federal government over \$3.4 billion in fire suppression. Grants through the National Fire Plan, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program, and other local, state, and federal fire-related programs have been established to bolster community abilities to prepare for and reduce the risk of wildfires. However, while these grants and programs are available nationwide, the nation’s wildfire policies and programs do not provide the consistent, meaningful, and long-term assistance needed by the rural poor and by economically distressed communities to mitigate or recover from wildfires.

Wildfires intensify rural poverty because they hit hardest those communities least able to protect themselves. A 2001 report by the University of Oregon’s Program for Watershed and Community Health (PWCH) found that approximately 3-5 million of the 10-15 million residents in the wildland-urban interface throughout the West lack incomes sufficient to meet basic economic needs, much less the cost of adequate wildfire protection (see the *Observer*, Vol. XXVII, No. 5, p. 9, for a discussion of the wildland-urban interface). The rural poor often live in the most fire-prone areas, live on properties that are most susceptible to wildfires, and have the fewest available resources to create defensible space around their homes and properties. Thus, they are more susceptible to wildfires than middle- and high-income rural residents, who often have greater access to the programs and resources needed to create defensible space.

To reverse this cycle of rural impoverishment and hazard vulnerability, public agencies, decision makers, and local communities must begin to understand these realities and take steps to assist the rural poor to secure the funds and

resources needed for fire protection. By helping public and private organizations increase the access that poor and isolated communities have to fire-related programs and resources, PWCH is working to build capacity among these groups with the specific goal of reducing wildfire risk.

PWCH intends to develop broad public awareness about the relationship between wildfire policies and programs and rural poverty. Such awareness can lead to changes in the way policies are developed and funding allocated so that increasingly scarce resources can equitably address the needs of all those in fire-prone areas. PWCH also hopes to demonstrate how redirecting resources will result in increased capacity among poorer communities to develop and implement wildfire prevention strategies. Expanding public awareness about the relationship between wildfire policies and programs and rural poverty is necessary if federal and state funds are to be more accessible to poor communities.

Determining Who Needs Assistance

Often, grants and programs rely on local financial matches to guarantee “community participation.” While it is important to have the understanding and involvement of the public, such programs may exclude people or communities without the financial resources, time, or skills to meet program requirements. Elderly and disabled citizens may not have the physical capacity to contribute labor, minorities may feel uncomfortable about engaging in traditional public participation processes, and impoverished citizens may not be able to take time away from their jobs and families to become involved.

Despite these broad categories of need, it can be difficult to know exactly who is in need of help. Given that public money supports most fire protection programs, that public resources are involved in providing emergency

support services to those who are dislocated and harmed by wildfires, and that severe dislocations can significantly impact the socioeconomic well-being of a community, it is essential to ensure that all people have equal access to programs and resources. The federal poverty line is one way to identify poverty and those without the capacity to protect themselves from wildfires, though there are people who are above the federal poverty line who also may not have the resources necessary to protect their homes. In light of this, federal agencies and social service organizations use various

assistance for state and federal programs and then providing extra fire protection assistance to those who qualify for these programs. Coordinating with local community organizations (such as watershed councils, community response teams, social service agencies, etc.) can facilitate in-kind matches from community groups and assist poor, elderly, and disabled community members to participate in fire-related programs.

Community Outreach and Capacity Building

PWCH is also working to develop and foster strategies that can empower poor and isolated communities and increase their capacity to implement fire protection programs. PWCH is currently working with Josephine County, Oregon, on a countywide effort to reduce the wildfire risk that threatens citizens, the environment, and quality of life within the county. Josephine County has some of the highest poverty rates in Oregon, with over half of the county's population living in rural, forested areas. Furthermore, a fire in 2002 had lasting impacts on county citizens. The fire burned close to 500,000 acres, cost over \$150 million, and threatened many citizens in the county.

PWCH is leading a process with the county to develop an integrated fire plan. The process is designed to assist those with the least capacity to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires. Additionally, the plan can help the county become more competitive for federal funding programs such as the National Fire Plan and FEMA's Pre-Disaster Mitigation Program. To assist the county to meet these requirements, and adhere to state and local guidelines for fire protection, PWCH is working closely with local, state, and federal land management, fire protection, and emergency management agencies. The project also includes an assessment of risk to communities in the wildland-urban interface, outreach to increase public awareness about wildfire risk, identification of wildfire mitigation strategies, tracking of information on activities related to fuels reduction, and a review of county response and evacuation methodologies.

The PWCH approach involves the county's rural fire protection districts as a way to reach citizens throughout the county. In addition, we are building relationships with diverse stakeholders, including social services agencies, faith-based and volunteer organizations, groups dedicated to promoting economic and community development, and others with programs designed to provide services to the rural poor and isolated communities. Creating these networks will increase the provision of services to all citizens and help ensure that poor and under-represented citizens are equal participants in creating safer, stronger communities.

Kathy Lynn
Program for Watershed and Community Health
Institute for a Sustainable Environment
University of Oregon
Eugene, Oregon



indicators of poverty to determine eligibility for assistance programs, including a percentage of the poverty level or per capita income, or the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) income limits.

There is no consistent method to measure poverty and community capacity in the context of wildfire. PWCH is attempting to address this by developing a more dynamic and reality-based framework to assess poverty indicators, community capacity, and the ways they work together to meet fire protection goals in communities and neighborhoods, and at the individual level. The capacity of a community can be defined as the ability of residents in a community to respond to external and internal stresses, to create and take advantage of opportunities, and to meet local needs. Low capacity communities have more difficulty accessing resources, implementing strategies, and meeting local objectives for fire protection.

Possible solutions to ensure that under-represented communities and populations have equal access to fire protection programs include utilizing existing structures employed by social service agencies to determine eligibility