

# The Seeley-Swan Fire Plan: Protecting our Community from Wildfire

By Roger Marshall and Megan Birzell

Words on paper, when put into action, become reality. That has been the case with the Seeley-Swan Fire Plan, which is now five years old. This well written, living document was the first of its kind in western Montana and serves as a national model for how a Community Wildfire Protection Plan should be prepared.

The Fire Plan is the result of a collaborative effort of community members and fire managers that began in March 2003. The Fire Plan Team met monthly over the course of a year to gather information from the Clearwater and Swan valleys and prepare the final document. The Fire Plan Team consisted of participants from the Seeley Lake Rural Fire District, Swan Valley Volunteer Fire Department, U.S. Forest Service (USFS), and Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC). With technical assistance from the Ecosystem Management Research Institute, the Seeley-Swan Fire Plan was completed in March 2004. Today, the Fuels Mitigation Task Force, including many of the original Fire Plan Team members along with representatives from the Clearwater Resource Council, Swan Ecosystem Center, and committed community members, implements the Fire Plan.

The Fire Plan developed action steps for addressing risks from wildfire and assessing fire fighting capabilities in the two valleys. It has created a means to assure coordination and cooperation of the fire fighting resources in the area. It provides information and knowledge to assist both the Seeley and Condon communities in preventing and reducing loss from future wildfire events. Many of these abilities were witnessed by local residents during the 2003 and 2007 fire seasons as well as other fire events. The response by our local firefighters has been fast and reliable, and their success at stopping small fires from becoming large and out of control infernos is outstanding.

The following table represents the number of wildfires within the fire plan area that were responded to by firefighting agencies over the past five fire seasons. Data were obtained from Lolo National Forest, Flathead National Forest, and Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation.

<b>FIRE SEASON</b>	<b>SUPPRESSED</b>	<b>ESCAPED INITIAL ATTACK</b>	<b>TOTAL FIRES</b>
2007	94	1	95
2006	63	2	65
2005	24	0	24
2004	38	0	38
2003	78	2	80

The ratio of successful fire suppression in the fire plan area to the total fire workload during the last five-year period is 98%.

However, despite our best efforts, sometimes a fire does escape initial attack. On those occasions, our local firefighters have been able to mount a coordinated response that has kept most of our homes, our property, and our lives safe.

One objective of the Fire Plan has been to outline strategies to protect community values from wildfire. To do that, the Fire Plan Team conducted an assessment of the risk our communities

face. A study of multiple factors was completed, including the type of forest fuels that exist and how readily they may ignite and burn, the slope of the land, the typical weather (or not so typical if drought persists), the number and density of houses and other structures, escape routes using roads and the highway, the availability of and access to water, and all the available firefighting resources. These and other components of our community determine the level of risk fire may pose for human safety and property.

But knowing what the risk is and doing something about it are two different things. Without taking action against the risk, we leave ourselves vulnerable. Fortunately, our communities have been taking action to reduce these risks. The Fuels Mitigation Task Force has been instrumental in obtaining grant money and personnel to do on-the-ground fuels reduction work on private land. Both the USFS and DNRC have actively reduced fuel loads in the Clearwater and Swan valleys.

The following chart details the acres treated both by human vegetation management and by natural wildfire that have reduced the risk of fire across all ownerships over the past five years.

<b>Fuel Reduction Acres 2003 – 2008</b>		
	<b>High Risk</b>	<b>Moderate Risk</b>
Acres identified for priority treatment	34197	105232
<i>Accomplished</i>		
North - Swan	2281	6741
South - Clearwater	2673	3715
Fire	128	1471
<b>Total</b>	<b>5082</b>	<b>11927</b>

The goal of fuels reduction projects is to reduce fuel loads and thereby reduce a fire’s potential intensity. The risk to and safety of firefighters is improved because the fire should not be as dangerous. Additional benefits of fuel mitigation include improved forest health, enhanced property values, lower firefighting costs, and better protection for structures and neighborhoods.

Fuels reduction projects also boost the local economy. A study from the University of Montana Bureau of Business and Economic Research suggests that for each one million board feet of timber harvested in Montana, nine full-time jobs are created. The study further suggests that, on average, about 1500 board feet per acre of merchantable forest products are generated from these fuel reduction projects and that they return, on average, about \$624 for each acre treated. These would be conservative estimates for the Clearwater and Swan valley forests that typically have higher growth and yields. Given these conservative numbers and the roughly 17,000 acres of fuels treatments conducted on high and moderate risk acres within our two valleys over the last five years, the economic benefit amounts to 25 million board feet of harvested forest products with a return of over \$10 million to landowners and agencies. Additionally, nearly 45 full-time jobs were created each year over the five-year period.

While great progress has been made, there is still more to be done. The process will take time, but we are seeing success. The benefits to managing the forests for fire risk are numerous and

support the “three legged stool” concept of protecting the health and vitality of the forest, supporting the local economy, and maintaining our rural way of life, thereby sustaining strong and vibrant communities.

The Seeley-Swan Fire Plan is a living document that was updated in 2008. The updated document can be found at the Clearwater Resource Council website - <http://crcmt.org/fuelsmgmt/fuelstaskforce/2008fireplan.pdf>

**Reference:**

Keegan, Fiedler, Morgan. 2004 Wildfire in Montana: Potential hazard reduction and economic effects of a strategic treatment program. *Forest Products Journal* [54(7/8):21-25]

Date: June 4, 2009