

Elkhorn Homeowners' Association Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP)

(Originally adopted September 1, 2004 and
amended April 4, 2010)

Executive Summary

The effects of settlement and forest practices, especially over the past 100 years, have changed the landscape and composition of the forest in and around Whitefish and northwest Montana. The control of naturally occurring wildfires has resulted in a number of missed fire cycles which, when combined with a climatic wet cycle for much of this period of time, has resulted in a heavily vegetated landscape. Vegetation has changed from more open conditions composed of fire-adapted species to dense forests composed of shade tolerant and fire intolerant species. The over-all result has been an increased risk of high-intensity wildfires that could threaten values at risk including homes, lives, property, and forest habitats where development intermixes with forestlands in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI).

The Elkhorn Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) is the result of community-wide fire protection planning developed by the residents of the Elkhorn Homeowners' Association, and addresses the community's vulnerability to wildfire and sets a course of action that the community can pursue to reduce its risks to wildfire. This plan was compiled during the summer of 2004 in response to the federal Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003 (HRFA) and the National Fire Plan which sets the charter for local communities to "work collaboratively" to address the issue of community wildfire protection.

Flathead County is in the early planning stages of developing a community wildfire protection plan and this document will be submitted to the planning committee for inclusion in the county's Community Wildfire Protection Plan. This plan is meant to address the immediate threat of wildfire to the residents of the Elkhorn community.

The format in the development of the CWPP follows the model developed by the Society of American Foresters, National Association of State Foresters, Western Governors' Association, National Association of Counties and the Communities Committee in its handbook called "Preparing a Community Wildfire Protection Plan".

The purpose of this document is to help the residents of Elkhorn clarify and refine its priorities for the protection of life, property, and critical infrastructure for the community and areas adjacent to the subdivision. It is also intended to lead the community in valuable discussions regarding management options and implications for the surrounding area.

The wildfire threat to the residents of Elkhorn Subdivision and the surrounding watershed is manageable if the homeowner association and others work together to address the issue. Local fire agencies are excellent resources for fire information and assistance. It is only through the combination of homeowner actions, community awareness, and firefighting capabilities that it will be possible to effectively reduce wildfire hazards. All of these efforts are incorporated into the Elkhorn Community Wildfire Protection Plan.

1. Community Description and Planning Process

Elkhorn Subdivision was created in 1981 and lies approximately 5 miles northwest of Whitefish, Montana on the north side of State Highway 93. It is comprised of 500 acres divided into 59 lots. There are currently 25 residences within the subdivision with a steady increase in building over the past few years. The lots within the subdivision are subject to formal covenants, conditions, and restrictions adopted by the Elkhorn Homeowners' Association, which has an elected Board of Directors.

During the spring of 2004, community concern was raised in regards to the risk wildfire poses to the community. As a result, the Elkhorn Board of Directors has created a Fire Information and Risk Management (FIRM) Committee. As a result, the FIRM committee and its members attended fire risk management workshops and held several community meetings to determine the level of community support. The Elkhorn subdivision has, obtained a detailed community risk evaluation from the local Fire Marshall, as well as professionals from the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation and the United States Forest Service on specific steps that Elkhorn can take to reduce the risks that fire poses to the community. This community risk rating was then used to identify the Elkhorn community's areas of vulnerability and to identify action items to help reduce its risk to catastrophic wildfire.

The recommendations from this report will be reviewed by these agencies and further refinements will be made. This document is intended for review and revision as needed over time as the needs of the community change over time.

The following is a list of agencies and personnel that participated in the creation of this community wildfire protection plan.

Michael Frost, Chair, Fire Information and Risk Management (FIRM) Committee, Elkhorn Homeowners' Association.

Dave Sipe, Fire Chief, Whitefish Volunteer Fire Department

Jeremy Pries, Fire Prevention Specialist, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation

Michael Justus, Forester with Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation/ NW Regional Resource Conservation and Development Council.

Lisa Timchak, District Ranger, Talley Lake Ranger Station, Whitefish Montana (now located in Kalispell, MT).

2. Involvement of Federal Agencies.

The USFS, Talley Lake Ranger Station, is the federal land manager for the area surrounding Elkhorn. The district has been actively engaged with the homeowners' association in looking at opportunities for collaborative projects to address the wildfire risks on land adjacent to the subdivision while meeting the multiple uses the forest lands to the residents of Whitefish. The USFS has completed approximately 8 acres fuels reduction along the northern border adjacent to the subdivision in 2003. Currently, the USFS is planning more comprehensive treatments on USFS land surrounding Elkhorn in the 2006 fiscal year. They are early in the planning process and detailed maps of the proposed treatment areas are being developed for input from the homeowners' association. Detailed maps of stand conditions and condition classes are also in the development stages.

3. Interested Parties

Early on, the FIRM committee recognized that it must have full community support for any action plan to be implemented. To have participation, the community needed to recognize the problem and find community based solutions that address the problem. The first step in this process was to bring in a technical specialist who could perform a community risk rating and provide science-based recommendations that address the wildfire risks that are specific to issues facing Elkhorn.

As a result, the FIRM committee and its members attended fire risk management workshops and held several community meetings to determine the level of community support. The Elkhorn community has obtained a detailed community risk evaluation from the local Fire Marshall, as well as professionals from the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation and the United States Forest Service on specific steps that can be taken to reduce the risk that fire poses to the community. This community risk rating was then used to identify vulnerable areas and lists actions items the subdivision can take to reduce its risk to catastrophic wildfire.

Landowners within the Elkhorn community are well motivated to address fire risk issues, especially if a financial incentive such as a public grant is provided. A preliminary community survey has determined that at least 30 landowners have expressed strong interest in participating in cost/share assistance program. Some of the absentee landowners are being contacted to determine their level of interest. It is believed that community involvement will increase, as more landowners are made aware of the increased fire risks and the possible opportunity to address these risks through a comprehensive approach partially funded with public grants. During the community meetings it was brought forward that the USFS has identified the Elkhorn area as a priority area for treatment in its wild land urban interface fuels reduction treatment program. During 2003, the Talley Lake Ranger District completed considerable thinning and burning to reduce the fuels adjacent to the subdivision. The Forest Service is planning a large comprehensive treatment for the area in its 2006 fiscal year.

Public meetings were held at the annual Elkhorn Homeowners' Association meeting held on July 17, 2004. A detailed report from the FIRM committee was presented and the homeowners' association provided input on the committee's progress and input was provided on the action items for the committee to pursue.

FIRM committee meetings were held with interested homeowners on May 13, 2004, May 21, 2004, and August 21, 2004. In addition, on May 19, 2004 both Whitefish Fire Chief Dave Sipe and Fire Marshall Doug Loy toured Elkhorn with two FIRM committee members and gave suggestions on ways that Elkhorn can improve a response during a fire or other emergency.

The following agencies and personnel were involved in the Elkhorn Wildfire Risk Assessment:

Michael Frost, Chair Fire Information and Risk Management Committee, Elkhorn Subdivision.

Dave Sipe, Fire Chief, Whitefish Volunteer Fire Department.

Doug Loy, Whitefish Fire Marshall.

Jeremy Pries, Fire Prevention Specialist, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation.

Michael Justus, Forester with Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation/ NW Regional Resource Conservation and Development Council.

Lisa Timchak, District Ranger, Talley Lake Ranger Station, Whitefish Montana.

Jim Reuter, Tally Lake Ranger Station, Whitefish Montana.

4. Establishing a Community Base Map

A community base map of the Elkhorn community was created in May 2004. This base map identified the property ownerships, home sites, topography, fuel conditions, roads systems and escape routes for the subdivision. This base map will be used to visually display the base line conditions from which community members can assess and make recommendations regarding protection and risk- reduction priorities. A detailed map of the surrounding USFS lands is currently being developed.

5. Community Risk Assessment

Through the efforts of the USFS, DNRC, and the Whitefish Rural Fire Department, a detailed Community Wildfire risk assessment was prepared in the spring of 2004. This risk assessment used the methodology and procedures outlined in the National Fire Protection Agency 1144 form. This assessment identified the number of homeowner “firewise” meetings, as well as the number of lots with high, medium, or low fuel loadings, fire history of the area, access issues, water sources, fire response time and other contributing factors that quantitatively address a community’s vulnerability to wildfire.

A. Community Situation

The topography within the subdivision is relatively steep with slopes (20 – 40%) and contains numerous canyons, chutes and chimneys, which contribute to extreme wildfire behavior. The roads system is steep with sustained grades averaging over 8% that lead to cul-de-sacs and dead end roads. There are heavy fuels in the community with dense stands of small overstocked Douglas-fir and grand fir. The extended drought has stressed these stands and the Scolytus beetle has severely attacked much of the grand fir in the area. When initially evaluated, less than thirty percent of the current homes met fire-resistant

guidelines. The assessment of forest fuel conditions in the subdivision shows that 50% of the lots have heavy fuel loading, 30% have moderate fuel loading and 20% have low fuel loads. The area has a high fire frequency (.40 fires/100 acres/10 year period) and also has a high recreational use with Skyles Lake positioned adjacent to it. The area has also been used for keg parties in the past. There are only two 2000 gallon dry hydrant sites in the subdivision and the prevailing aspect is west, which faces the prevailing winds and direction of fire spread. The Community Fire Risk rating for the subdivisions scored 138 points. This is a moderate to high community risk rating.

6. Community Hazard Reduction Priorities.

The FIRM committee solicited recommendations from the homeowner representatives and have come up with the following recommendations that address both public and firefighter safety for its residents.

Improve wildfire response.

A top priority for the subdivision membership is to improve the response time for emergency responders to the Elkhorn community.

Installation and Maintenance of Proper Road Signs and Addresses.

In order to help emergency fire responders locate a fire as quickly as possible, it is important that the roads and addresses of homes within Elkhorn be clearly marked. A project is currently underway to identify all roads within Elkhorn with signs that are both esthetically pleasing and clearly visible. Addresses for homes within Elkhorn are, for the most part, clearly marked. Homeowners, however, should be periodically reminded of the importance of having their addresses clearly visible from the road in order to help facilitate an emergency fire response. The road sign and address system used throughout Elkhorn should also be reviewed in conjunction with the current project underway by Flathead County to correct confusing addresses to facilitate emergency 911 responses. The responsibility for seeing that road signs are properly maintained and that the address system used throughout Elkhorn is consistent with Flathead County 911 standards should be assigned to a particular Elkhorn committee, such as the Roads Committee.

Identify and Maintain Emergency Fire Exits.

In addition to the main entrance/exit from Antler Ridge Road to Highway 93, there are two emergency fire exits in Elkhorn. One emergency exit is to the east onto Highway 93 through use of Antler Ridge Lane and the other is to the west onto Beaver Lake Road through use of High Meadow Loop. These exits should be regularly maintained and identified for Elkhorn residents. There is currently a project in place to do this.

Hazard Mitigation.

The topography within Elkhorn is relatively steep with slopes (20 – 40%) and contains numerous canyons, chutes and chimneys, which contribute to extreme wildfire behavior. The roads system is steep with sustained grades averaging over 8% that lead to cul-de-sacs and dead end roads. There are heavy fuels in the subdivision with dense stands of small overstocked Douglas-fir and grand fir. The extended drought has stressed these stands and the Scolytus beetle has severely attacked much of the grand fir in the area. Less than thirty percent of the current homes initially met fire-resistant guidelines. This percentage has increased substantially over the past five years. The assessment of forest fuel conditions in the subdivision shows that 50% of the lots have heavy fuel loading, 30% have moderate fuel loading and 20% have low fuel loads. The heaviest concentration of fuels lies in the draw that divides Elkhorn. The community's roads cross this draw in several places. A fast moving fire running up this chimney chute would likely cut off access to many of the homes, leaving them vulnerable with no emergency access routes. Reducing the fuel loading around Elkhorn is a top priority in order to address public and firefighter safety.

Reducing ground and "ladder" fuels throughout Elkhorn is a major component of this CWPP. One of the best ways to protect against wildfires is to remove downed and dead trees that act as fuel for a wildfire. Another way to protect the community is to keep a wildfire on the ground where it can be more easily controlled by removing low growing tree limbs that act as a "ladder" fuel that allows a fire to move into the trees where it is much more difficult to control. The responsibility for fuels reduction projects should rest with individual landowners, but a project should also be established to encourage landowners to reduce ground and ladder fuels on their property through education, volunteer projects, and applications for public grants. Many residents in Elkhorn have already started projects to "firewise" their property and the Board of Directors has authorized application for a public grant that is currently pending and may provide financial assistance to individual landowners who agree to specific fuel reduction and/or thinning projects. Fuel reduction or thinning projects should also take into account the need to protect wildlife habitat and avoid unnecessary adverse ecological impact on the environment. Public foresters and wildlife experts should be consulted to help develop a balanced approach to fuel reduction and thinning projects that does not needlessly destroy wildlife habitat.

Action Items:

Landowners within Elkhorn are well motivated to address wildfire risk issues, especially if a financial incentive such as a public grant is provided. A preliminary community survey has determined that at least 30 landowners have expressed strong interest in participating in cost/share assistance program. Some of the absentee landowners are being contacted to determine their level of interest. It is believed that community involvement will increase, as more

landowners are made aware of the increased fire risks and the possible opportunity to address these risks through a comprehensive approach partially funded with public grants. During the community meetings, it was brought forward that the USFS has identified the Elkhorn area as a priority area for treatment in its wild land urban interface (WUI) fuels reduction treatment program. During 2003, the Talley Lake Ranger District has done considerable thinning and burning to reduce the fuels adjacent to Elkhorn to reduce the under-story and ladder fuels adjacent to the community. It is hoping to develop a large comprehensive treatment for the area in its 2006 fiscal year.

Identification of Available Water Resources Within Community For Possible Use To Suppress a Wildfire. In order to help fire fighters assess options in the event of a wildfire, it is recommended that we identify and make known to local fire fighting agencies all available water sources within Elkhorn, as well as develop a plan for maximizing the usefulness of these resources in the event of a wildfire. Current resources include two 2000 gallon underground tanks located at the intersection of Antler Ridge Road and Elk Ridge Road as well as at the intersection of Antler Ridge Road and Trails End Road. Recently, however, two homeowners have either created, or are in the process of creating, ponds of water holding as much as 60,000 gallons that may be available in the event of a large wildfire. It is recommended that Elkhorn coordinate efforts with local fire officials to develop a plan for maximizing the use of available water resources within Elkhorn in the event of a wildfire that includes working with cooperative landowners to use water that they may have available. It is also recommended that Elkhorn cooperate with local fire experts on the best way to make water resources available for use during a wildfire and consider installation of "dry" hydrants where this would significantly improve the accessibility to water resources. Well pumping capacities vary throughout Elkhorn from 50 gallons a minute to 11 gallons a minute. It is recommended that we coordinate with local fire experts to determine whether using water from wells of cooperating landowners would be useful in developing a community wildfire protection plan and, if so, take steps to implement a plan to do this. Last, when residents decide to install water features such as ponds on their property, it is recommended that efforts be made to encourage the landowner's cooperation in making such water available in the event of a wildfire.

Determine and Assign Responsibility For Regular Maintenance of Fire Related Infrastructures. It is recommended that responsibility for regular maintenance of fire related infrastructures such as roads, road signs, emergency fire exits, underground water tanks, be assigned to specific committees or individuals and that a maintenance log and a checklist maintained by the Board of Directors to assure that routine maintenance occurs on schedule. Roads should be regularly evaluated to determine whether they could support fire truck access to property

throughout Elkhorn.

Coordinate Efforts With Appropriate Public Agencies. Elkhorn's CWPP should be coordinated with public agencies such as the Whitefish Fire Department, DNRC, and USFS in order to take advantage of the knowledge, expertise, and resources of these public agencies and to maximize efficient cooperation in the event of a wildfire. Public agencies can also help with education and informational programs designed to raise community awareness of wildfire issues.

Develop a System For Sharing Wildfire Risk and Other Prevention Information Within Community. It is recommended that some system for sharing wildfire risk and other prevention information be developed to allow Elkhorn residents and landowners to be kept advised of current wildfire protection information. Such a system could be as simple as a community bulletin board at the entrance to Elkhorn, combined with regular mailings or as sophisticated as development of an Elkhorn website that would make a variety of wildfire related information quickly accessible to anyone wishing to access it. Several Elkhorn residents who possess special computer knowledge have expressed interest in possibly developing an Elkhorn website containing essential wildfire risk information in addition to other helpful "forest living" information of interest to the community. This possible website would also have links to DNRC, USFS, and "firewise" websites for the most recent updates on fire related issues.

Develop Wildfire Emergency Response and Evacuation Plan. It is recommended that Elkhorn work with public agencies that are primarily responsible for responding to wildfires to develop an emergency response and/or evacuation plan as deemed appropriate. Any such plan should be shared with Elkhorn landowners and include a description of legal rights and responsibilities during an emergency or evacuation.

This Elkhorn CWPP, and action items, should be periodically reviewed, updated, and modified as conditions warrant.

CWPP AND ELKHORN UPDATE.

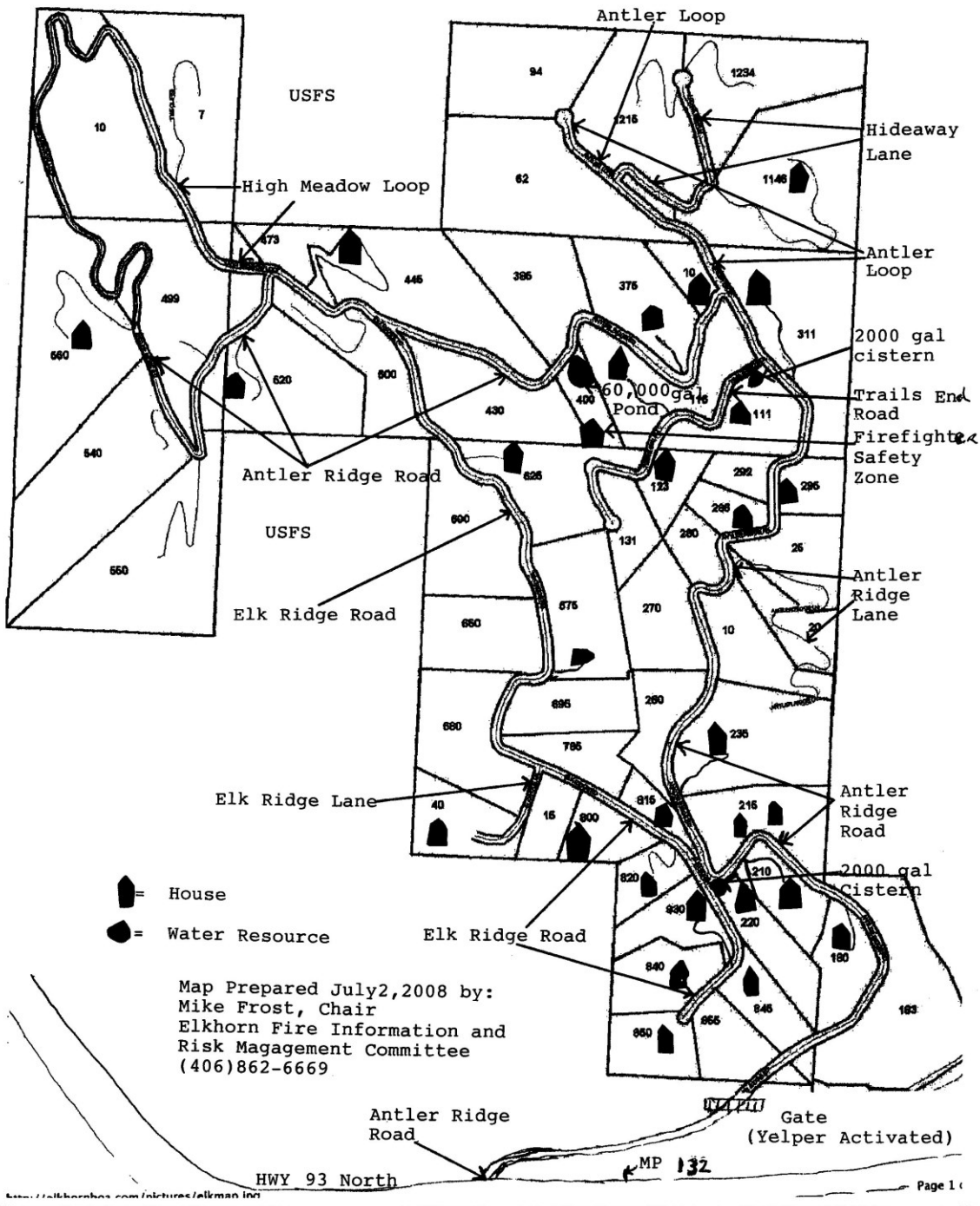
Since adoption of its CWPP in September, 2004, the following has occurred:

1. Elkhorn has installed new road signage that clearly marks all roads in the Elkhorn community and has encouraged homeowners to install appropriately sized reflective address signs that can be clearly seen at night.
2. For each of the past five years, Elkhorn has been officially recognized as a "firewise" community by FirewiseUSA and has participated in regular organized "firewise" activities throughout this period of time.

3. A “shaded fuel break” has been completed around much of the Elkhorn community on adjacent state land as a result of “small timber sales” completed by DNRC in coordination with Elkhorn as part of Elkhorn’s CWPP. DNRC has become a valuable and reliable partner with Elkhorn on a number of other “firewise” projects of mutual interest over the past five years. This excellent cooperative relationship continues to this day.
4. A “firefighter safety zone” has been established at the home of Dan and Pam Richardson, 400 Antler Ridge Road, which is equipped with a sophisticated fire suppression system (see photo attached) that sprays a perimeter of water from the home, has a circular driveway capable of accommodating up to three large fire trucks, a 60, 000 pond, and a back-up generator system that allows the system to work in the event of power failure.
5. Elkhorn has developed a strong collaborative relationship with WFD to help improve fire service to Elkhorn and other communities surrounding Whitefish. Elkhorn is currently working with WFD to help identify roads, water resources, and hazards for a software program known as “Red Zone” as part of a “Mapping Your Neighborhood” project.
6. Elkhorn has been active with the recently created Whitefish Area Fire Safe Council to help create and implement the Whitefish Area CWPP and to collaborate on other “firewise” activities of mutual interest.
7. As a result Elkhorn’s creation of a formal CWPP, 26 Elkhorn owners applied for fuels reduction and “firewise” grants through NW Resources, Conservation, and Development that has resulted in the treatment of 145 acres within Elkhorn. Elkhorn has developed an excellent collaborative relationship with NW RC&D (which administers a number of “firewise” and fuels reduction grants) and continues to work with NW RC&D on other projects of mutual interest.
8. Over the past five years, USFS has successfully partnered with Elkhorn on numerous “firewise” projects, including working together on a number of community “firewise” day events. USFS also completed numerous fuels reduction projects on USFS land adjacent to Elkhorn, including the Beaver Creek drainage area and a limited, but nonetheless very helpful ,dead fuels and ladder fuel reduction project on USFS land on the north side of Elkhorn. USFS has become one of Elkhorn’s most reliable and effective partners in helping reduce wildfire risks to the area.



ELKHORN



This CWPP was edited by Mike Frost, Chair, Fire Information and Risk Management (FIRM) Committee, Elkhorn HOA, Whitefish, MT on April 4, 2010.