

**Program Title:** Community Wildfire Risk Reduction in Austin, Texas

**I. Formative Evaluation**

In 2011 a year-long fire season culminated in the worst fire in Texas history. The Bastrop fire occurred just 45 minutes from downtown Austin and resulted in the destruction of more than 1,600 homes and multiple fatalities. Simultaneously, wildfires also burned more than 7,000 acres in Travis County, destroying 57 homes. It was undeniable that wildfire was a threat to Austin, one of the fastest-growing cities in the country, with a population nearing 1 million in 2020.

Early analysis was unnerving: almost 65% of homes in Travis County and over 50% of the homes in the City of Austin were at risk from wildfire. For example, the City of Austin Emergency Operations Plan identified wildfire as a year-round risk and ranked it as one of three high-risk threats. A 2019 CoreLogic report that looked at the risk of wildfire damage to residential structures ranked Austin fifth among the top fifteen metropolitan areas based on the cost of reconstructing those homes.

To determine the extent of the threat wildfire posed to the area and develop a plan to confront it collaboratively, the City of Austin joined forces with Travis County to form the Austin Travis County Wildfire Coalition. The result was the development and adoption of the first of its kind Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) that serves as the primary guide, addressing wildfire risk collectively.

**II. Process Evaluation**

Following the adoption of the CWPP, the City and County have taken steps to reduce the destructive impacts of wildfire through efforts that align with the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management. This strategy calls for:

1. Restoring and maintaining resilient landscapes through prescribed burning and mechanical fuels mitigation.
2. Creating fire-adapted communities, ensuring homes and landscaping are ignition resistant.
3. Safe and effective response to wildfires.

The Austin City Council also adopted a resolution focused on improving planning and preparedness in the wildland-urban interface (WUI). To meet a goal of zero wildland fire-related fatalities, the resolution calls for the City to “promote the development of wildland fire defensible strategies, and support incorporation of these strategies within the City’s existing regulatory framework to ensure communities and ecosystems are resilient to extreme fire behavior.”

There are many City departments involved in wildfire issues. However, the Austin Fire Department’s (AFD) Wildfire Division, created after the 2011 Labor Day fires, is the primary resource addressing these issues. Working to identify and proactively reduce wildfire risk, it includes both civilian staff and firefighters and works with many departments across the City.

### III. Impact Evaluation

AFD led the City of Austin to become the largest municipality in the Nation to adopt the International Code Council's WUI Code. The Wildfire Division is improving our City's capacity to support and expand the use of prescribed fire through the collaborative development of the City's first Prescribed Fire Guidelines. "Austin Areas Wildfire Hub" data portal, a new platform for collaboration, information sharing, cross-agency initiatives, and grass-roots coalition building, was created to provide resources on all things wildfire in Austin. In 2020, we conducted 2,476 outreach hours in a combination of outreach and mitigation activities. Austin leads the state with 20 nationally recognized Firewise Sites and the state's only Firewise Alliance, a collaborative of engaged and empowered Austin communities. Over 51% of communities at risk have a local-level community wildfire protection plan. The Wildfire Division facilitated advanced WUI firefighter training for all AFD firefighters.

We conducted assessments on City of Austin properties located in the WUI to determine the need, feasibility, and priorities for vegetation management to reduce wildfire risk. Working with land managing departments across the City and county to prioritize vegetation management, we protected 122 of 150 structures, at a value of \$29,659,889, by installing shaded fuel breaks within community protection zones.

### IV. Outcome Evaluation

Improve the city staff's and public's understanding of wildfire risk in the wildland-urban interface (WUI).

- Adopted a comprehensive Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP);
- Refined wildfire risk analysis on a local level [online wildfire-risk and vulnerable populations tool](#)

Include wildfire considerations in Austin's environmental and planning policies.

- Added wildfire-related considerations to Austin's comprehensive plan and hazard mitigation plan;
- Added wildfire evacuation to Austin's emergency operations plan;

Improve land use regulatory tools to reduce wildfire risk.

- Adopted a [wildland-urban interface \(WUI\) code](#);
- Made recommendations for revisions to Austin's land development code;

Improved wildfire-related coordination, capacity, and outreach.

- Created a [wildfire division](#) with staff dedicated to wildfire preparation, prevention, and mitigation;
- Developed a comprehensive wildfire strategic plan
- Organized a local wildfire coalition;

Ultimately collaboration is the key to effective Community Wildfire Risk Reduction. This is not an issue that any single agency can solve; it takes an entire community to prepare for wildfire. Many communities look to the Fire Service for help in confronting this threat. By incorporating wildfire risk reduction into your Community Risk Reduction strategies, you give your residents their best chance to save their lives and property.