

A GREAT OPPORTUNITY TO HELP REDUCE WILDFIRE RISK

The 2012 and 2013 fire seasons demonstrated current conditions in the Wood River and Sawtooth Valleys present an unacceptably high risk of catastrophic wildfires, like the Halstead and Beaver Creek fires. While some conditions, like warmer, dryer summers are beyond our control, several others can be addressed.

Last February, a broad-based group of dedicated Sawtooth and WRV stakeholders (including local governments, businesses, landowners, non-profits, emergency response teams and concerned citizens) called the Sawtooth Valley Wildland Fire Collaborative was established to tackle these issues. This group, organized and led by representatives of the City of Stanley, the Sawtooth Society and the Forest Service, has been gathering, reviewing and refining information from a wide range of experts and sources to develop practical recommendations on steps to reduce wildfire risk. Their recommendations, publicly presented in Stanley at the end of last month, include:

- Focused point protection of structures, infrastructure and high value areas: Creating defensible space through tree thinning, fuel reduction and implementing FIREWISE guidelines: <http://firewise.org/>
- Prescribed burns: Using placement and size to break up extensive stands of unburned forest to help stop crown fire runs.
- Management of natural ignitions: Modifying fire suppression strategies to create/enhance fuel modification areas.
- Administrative and education steps: Strengthening knowledge of/compliance with FIREWISE and expanding its funding; creating more timely and proactive restrictions and enforcement on campfires in dispersed camping areas during high fire danger periods.

A copy of their recommendations is available on the Sawtooth Society website, www.sawtoothsociety.org. This is a must read for

anyone interested in helping promote steps to significantly reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires. Implementation of these steps will take several years, involve certain risks, and competition for federal and other funds to pay the costs of implementation is vigorous. Thus, strong and sustained community involvement and support are essential. Support can be evidenced via the Society website or by calling/emailing Steve Botti (Stanley City Council President-208-608-8739; sbotti.stanley@gmail.com) or Gary O'Malley (Sawtooth Society ED-208-721-2909; gary@sawtoothsociety.org), and by participation in future public meetings (which will be posted on the website).

We cannot eliminate the risk of future wildfires, but experience in other Western and Canadian communities shows by working together we can reduce this risk to a more acceptable level. The Collaborative has started the process by pointing the way, now it's up to all of us to help make it happen.

P. Hill, President, Sawtooth Society