

Going on the offensive in the South



Christina Newhouse shows David Berens some areas of concern within the community wildfire protection plan for Upper Burke County, North Carolina. Berens is a prevention and mitigation specialist with the USDA Forest Service Southern Region's Fire and Aviation Management, and Christina Newhouse is the wildfire resiliency initiatives program manager with Carolina Land and Lakes Resource Conservation and Development, a recent Community Wildfire Defense Grant program recipient. The community wildfire protection plans will help guide wildfire response. (USDA Forest Service photo by Elizabeth Bunzendahl)

GEORGIA—Communities across the South are taking action now to mitigate against the risk of catastrophic wildfires.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service's Community Wildfire Defense Grants are helping them take action by enabling tribal, state and local governments, as well as private landowners, to make plans and take measures against the risk of catastrophic wildfires. In Oklahoma, this means that crews are removing hazardous fuels and building fuelbreaks. In Georgia, Kentucky and North Carolina, county and local governments are creating community wildfire protection plans to guide future mitigation efforts and wildfire response.

Turner Falls Park in Davis, Oklahoma, greatly benefited from the grant funding, receiving approximately \$134,000 to reduce wildfire risk in and around the park. Before mitigation work began last November, the park was dense with decades of fuel buildup.

“The funding allowed us to reduce the hazardous fuels and vegetation in Turner Falls Park. Before the mitigation work, had fire become established, it would have led to extreme fire behavior,” said Brian Ryles, fuels specialist with the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food, and Forestry.

Across the park, there were places that were once completely inaccessible due to dense overgrowth. Now, firefighters can reach the interior by all-terrain vehicles equipped with slip-on water tanks and pumps.

“Once we do these projects, we can hand ongoing maintenance back to the local community. So, instead of needing heavy equipment and aerial resources, they’ll be able to control a fire here with the resources they have available,” said Ryles. “We’re hitting a lot of avenues at the same time,” he continued, referring to other beneficial results, such as improved wildlife habitat and enhanced recreational opportunities.

The Community Wildfire Defense Grant program, authorized by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, is intended to help at-risk, low-income communities and tribes plan for and reduce the risk of wildfire.

Across the South, \$1.65 million dollars were allocated in the first round of competitive funding to create or update 80 community wildfire protection plans, thanks to the Community Wildfire Defense Grant program. Completed protection plans not only guide wildfire response but are used to identify and prioritize future mitigation projects. An approved protection plan increases the likelihood of receiving external funding through grants.

“At some point you can only play defense so much,” said Ryles. “It’s time to go on the offense and this is what that looks like.”

The USDA Forest Service’s Southern Regional priorities are to improve ecological conditions across landscapes, reduce wildfire risks, restore and maintain water quality, and enable access to forest benefits.

Friday, March 29, 2024