



CITY OF RAPID CITY

RAPID CITY, SOUTH DAKOTA 57701

Department of Fire and Emergency Services
Fire Prevention Division

1930 Promise Rd
(605) 394-5233
Fax (605) 394-5235

Wildland Urban Fire Mitigation Plan & Rapid City Survivable Space Initiative

The sole purpose of a Wildland fuels mitigation plan is to create a setting within the Wildland Urban Interface where in the event of a fire, the fire spread and over all negative impact can be reduced for both the specific property and neighborhood community.

Mitigation plans have historically been utilized to create defensible properties, when they actually are intended to create *survivable* properties. Survivable, meaning they will be able to better withstand the effects of a wildfire without intervention and direct protection provided by firefighting forces. In reality during a wildfire event it is likely that there will not be adequate firefighting resources available, or conditions will not allow for protection of all properties.

We realize and operate the **Survivable Space Initiative** on the basic principle that fighting fire is an *inadequate* means of protecting the community, and the number one job of a fire department is not fire fighting, its fire protection. We have great fire fighters, but the #1 need for the best fire fighting resources is fire, and an uncontrollable fire in the wildland urban areas of the city is not good for the community and is a test worth avoiding.

The Rapid City Fire Department works in conjunction with the South Dakota Department of Agriculture to make grant money available to homeowners who need assistance making their homes and property survivable in a wildfire. Through the Rapid City **Survivable Space Initiative**, this program provides information and education to homeowners and neighborhood communities about living with wildfire, and assists with the costs of fuel mitigation. Participants in the initiative receive recognition from the Fire Chief and Mayor via a certificate of recognition and also receive a sign they may display on their property identifying them as property owners who are doing their part to create a fire adapted community.

We also work in conjunction with the local Great Plains Fire Safe Council, giving support to all residents in the Black Hills Area and the state through education and awareness. We just recently finished a 6min DVD that will be mailed and used in a unique way to remind all WUI residents in the state that wildland fire is part of their personal landscape, and provides information and assistance in an entertaining format. Designed to peak interest, we expect great results from this project.

The heavily populated WUI area in Rapid City is inundated with heavy ladder fuels under an overgrown forest canopy. Individual landowners live in close proximity to one another, and multiple structure ignitions at one time which will quickly over tax resources is likely in the present state. These interface communities join one another and pose a significant threat to the surrounding Rapid City community at large. A good portion of the current area of focus has a limited water supply which will make any efforts to suppress a significant event very difficult.

Many attribute the current state of heavy fuel loading with either ignorance or indifference by the property owners. While this may be true with a small minority, our assessments have revealed quite the opposite. Most homeowners understand the danger they and their communities are currently in and do wish to be part of the solution. Many times, unfortunately, cost is the deciding factor in the degree of participation in fuel reduction projects. It is for this reason that the Rapid City Fire Department through the Survivable Space Initiative actively pursues grant money from many sources to aid in the effort.

Combustible building materials are another problem addressed in the Initiative. Many homes in Rapid City's wildland urban areas are constructed using combustible exterior materials, particularly cedar shake roofs. You cannot overcome shortcomings in building design with tactics, and this situation would greatly contribute to the overtaxing of resources mentioned above. To address this, we also pursue grant funds for combustible building materials replacement.

Through the Initiative individual homeowners, homeowners associations, or neighborhood communities receive the information they need to understand that fire will be a part of their personal landscape again in the future. Gaining the knowledge to make informed decisions on how to live in a wildland urban fire environment will help them maintain a survivable space and live in a community that is adapted to fire.

We feel the reason the program is so successful is that we take the time to talk with homeowners and explain the steps they can take to reduce the hazards on their property. Check lists are a guide and a tool, but giving knowledge, not just information, is what makes the difference. Building trust with the homeowner and demonstrating the willingness to work for a solution brings positive results. This qualitative approach has been well received and has produced not only informed homeowners but strong relationships within our wildland urban community.

These hazard mitigation projects will produce a fire safe environment within the neighborhoods in the project area and reduce the risk of fire spreading at an uncontrollable rate throughout the community. Positive impacts within the scope of the **Survivable Space Initiative** include safer neighborhoods for many years to come, a safer environment for fire fighters who currently face dangerous fire behavior in the project area, and a significant decrease in potential loss of high dollar amounts for the community.

Emergency preparedness for an imminent threat from wildfire should include familiarization with escape routes, assembling emergency supplies and belongings in a safe spot, and ensure all residents within the home are on the same page. We remind homeowners to stay aware of the latest news on the fire from local media and the fire department, and always follow their own personal action plan and *leave early*.

The fundamental goal for homeowners in our Wildland Urban area is to understand the concept of fire resistive construction and landscapes. Providing this knowledge will further their ability to maintain a survivable space and live in a community that is compatible with nature.

Tim Weaver
Lieutenant
Survivable Space Initiative Coordinator
Rapid City Fire Department