

Division of Agricultural Sciences & Natural Resources

Stillwater taking lead in wildfire precaution

STILLWATER, Okla. – Stillwater is a bit of a pioneer in becoming the largest city in the state to receive a FIREWISE designation.

Oklahoma has a long and strong history of burning up in wildfires. The whole purpose of FIREWISE is to protect your community from the threats associated with wildfires, said Trent Hawkins, Stillwater fire marshal.

"Not only does the program provide awareness to property owners it provides awareness to our firefighters that there are areas where they need to take extra precautions when determining tactics for a wildfire," he said. "Ultimately, for any program geared toward fire prevention, the primary concern is the conservation of life and then property."



To aid in this effort, Oklahoma State University Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources post-doc Dirac Twidwell, department of natural resource ecology and management, assembled the Community Wildfire Hazard and Risk Assessment for Stillwater. The program identifies some of the major threats to homeowners in different parts of the city.

Areas at greatest risk are located in the southwest and southeast portions of the assessment area.

"Ratings in those areas are higher due to limited emergency vehicle access into subdivisions, high densities of dead end roads or cul-de-sacs with inadequate turning space for emergency vehicles and numerous roads lined with highly flammable vegetation," Twidwell said. "Those areas also have housing developments located in areas of dense Eastern redcedar stands within an unmanaged crosstimbres matrix, inadequate defensible space around houses, and the location of houses next to a large natural landscape with a high probability of wildfire occurrence."

The assessment shows these areas are rated as "moderate risk" areas. This means the chances of a majority of homes in the community surviving a wildfire is fair, and need some minor improvements to make the community more fire resistant.

"I look forward to meeting with local civic groups, homeowner associations, and any other interested groups to present our findings and discuss ways to improve survivability of property from the threat posed by wildfire," said Hawkins.

Alternatively, areas with the lowest wildfire hazard ratings were located in the interior of the city where subdivision designs provide greater sources of access for emergency vehicles and the presence of volatile fuels is noticeably reduced.

Stillwater received an overall rating of moderate, however that designation will change in the coming months and years due to many factors.

"A major priority for the long-term wildfire hazard rating of the Stillwater Assessment Area should be to increase fuels management at the wildland-urban interface of the city," Twidwell said. "Dense stands of cedar trees are located around the perimeter of the city, especially to the southwest, and many rangelands are currently experiencing the initial stages of cedar encroachment to the north and east."

The assessment could have some major implications for the city.

"Now that areas of concern have been identified, we as a community can begin discussions on how to possibly remedy the situation in order to provide better protection for property owners in the event of a wildfire," Hawkins said. "We want the property owners to be able to evacuate safely, if needed, but also we want to improve the fire department's ability to enter an area."

The assessment is close to being launched on the City of Stillwater's website (Stillwater.org). This program could serve as a template for other cities and communities around the state to become FIREWISE.

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REPORTER/MEDIA CONTACT:

Sean Hubbard
Communications Specialist
Agricultural Communications Services
145 Agriculture North
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, OK 74078