

PREVENTION AND EDUCATION TEAMS— A VALUABLE RESOURCE



Jim Funk

Wildland fire prevention and education teams were developed to respond to specific wildland fire conditions or threats that might result in increased fire occurrence and losses of resources, property, and life. Since the first one was used in the Southwest in 1996, such teams have proven to be beneficial in all geographic areas of the country, and they are becoming more widely recognized over time. Yet agencies are still not clear on their use and function.

I have had the pleasure of serving on several teams and find each one to be unique and challenging. In the past 10 years, I have seen an evolution in teams and how agencies use them.

A successful prevention and education team reflects a joint effort in which the team listens to the agency, develops an agreed upon strategy, and implements the plan. In my opinion, prevention and education teams are effective and efficient, and they accomplish stated objectives for the host agency. However, there is still a learning curve for teams and agencies to make the accomplishments even better.

In the past, a Federal or State agency would ask an incoming team, "We called you in because we

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have a very serious situation. What can you do for us?" Teams helped the agency do a quick assessment of prevention needs and developed a strategy to raise awareness and get the word out. Now, an agency usually has a plan in mind before calling in a team, although often that plan is not specific. It is still the team's function to help assess the situation and advise a strategy to reach the objectives.

Prevention and education teams bolster an agency's capacity to reduce the number of fire starts. Honestly, I find that these teams often get to focus on what the host agency has always wanted to do, but doesn't have the time. It is amazing what a team can do when allowed to spend 2 entire weeks on a specific mission without the interruptions of the normal daily workload.

What Can a Prevention and Education Team Do for You?

Although raising awareness is always part of the incident management teams (IMT) mission to protect life/property/resources and suppress the fire, other broad-based issues typically need attention. There is a growing interest in fire

information and "what is the immediate threat to me?" If there are IMTs assigned to a larger fire, their information officers handle the fire status and community threat near the fire. Prevention and education teams can assist the effort by keeping surrounding communities informed and by coordinating the IMT prevention message and concerns into the team messaging. This helps reduce additional fire starts in the area that would complicate the IMT's main objectives. The prevention and education team is usually separate from the IMT and must not conflict with the IMT's mission.

Beyond awareness and immediate threat, I find the public wants to understand the wildfire issues. For example, a community might ask, "What does 'dry fuels' really mean?" "What is causing all the fires?" "What do the restrictions mean?" The team's mission is to work with the host agency to make the issues and answers clear with simple and understandable messaging.

Two recent examples of messaging were in Utah (2012) and Texas (2011). The goal in Utah was to simplify the fire restrictions of Federal and State agencies into a simple message. Symbols of the

main fire restrictions were formatted on a single page with green circles for acceptable and red circles with a slash (internationally recognized) for unacceptable. Agency personnel, as well as the public, found the messaging direct and understandable. In Texas, a product was developed to provide simple guidance on personal actions for the "Ready, Set, Go!" program in the State. Several other related products conveyed the central themes of the State's prevention program. Products on ember awareness, landscaping, and construction can be viewed at the Texas Forest Service Web site <<http://texasforestservicetamu.edu/main/article.aspx?id=8516>>.

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In both cases, the agencies realized a need to refresh and simplify the prevention messages so they could inform and involve the public in an effort to garner support in the overall effort. In general, people want to do the right thing; they want to know what to do for themselves and the community. Getting individuals to take action is the answer, rather than an agency telling the public how to behave. As simple as this concept is, agencies often violate the principle.

Prevention and education teams are also asked to interface with local governments and community groups. I believe community engagement is going to be a growing task with these teams. Working with concerned individuals and groups, the team involves local people by listening to their concerns and proposed solutions, providing information, and filling in gaps of communication with open discussions.

Recent examples of community engagement are from Kentucky, Louisiana, and Georgia. Working directly with communities has reduced arson problems in the Redbird District of the Daniel Boone National Forest in Kentucky and the Marlow area in Louisiana. In both instances, the community was made more aware of the situation, felt empowered, and the incidence of arson was reduced. In Georgia, teams met with island communities, where self-protection was the issue; the team listened to the issues and helped the com-

munity forge plans to protect themselves by using the Firewise Communities program and available mitigation resources. Building broad partnerships was especially beneficial in this assignment.

Other tasks for prevention and education teams are to develop prevention campaigns, professional informational materials, a long-term prevention strategy, Web site and social media messaging, and prevention implementation plans. These types of tasks may not be completed in a 2-week assignment, but one value of a prevention and education team is to get the conversation started and leave the host agency with suggestions to guide future efforts.

Getting the Best From Prevention and Education Teams

To make the most of your prevention and education team, the first thing to decide is your prevention needs. What one action will best help your prevention effort? You may need to raise awareness, build partnerships, develop a prevention campaign, or create useful publications. If you are unsure, you may

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READY SET GO!

delivers the preparedness message, so residents and firefighters stay safe.

▶ GET READY!

- Create defensible space around your home.
- Create a family disaster plan.
- Create a plan for your pets.
- Plan alternate evacuation routes.
- Pre-load GPS unit with evacuation routes.
- Designate emergency meeting location.
- Consider safe zones within your community.
- Know how to shut off your gas.
- Assemble an emergency supply kit.

▶ GET SET!

- Pack vehicle and back into driveway.
- Turn off pilot lights and propane tanks.
- Close windows and leave doors unlocked.
- Shut off air conditioning.
- Shut off gas at meter.
- Leave lights on to aid firefighters.
- Dress in cotton or wool clothing.
- Drink plenty of water.

▶ GO!

- **Evacuate early** - don't wait to be told. You may be more at risk if you decide to wait until the last minute.
- Take your emergency supply kit.

Wildland Fire Prevention and Education Teams (WFPET)



What criteria are used for ordering a WFPET?

- Current and predicted weather indexes, such as red flag warnings, Keetch-Byram Drought Index, rainfall amounts, drought indexes, etc.;
- Fuel conditions and loading; and
- Fire occurrence.

What is the process for ordering a WFPET?

- Through the Resource Ordering and Status System (ROSS), as done with other resources.

What positions are normally on a WFPET?

- Team leader;
- Fire prevention specialist team member;
- Public affairs or public information officer team member; and
- Other team members as required such as administrative support, finance, logistics, law enforcement, agency liaison, etc.

What are the typical activities of a WFPET and what type of products can a WFPET produce?

- Typical activities: generating prevention contacts, developing prevention and materials, organizing

and appearing at prevention events, attending community meetings, distributing prevention materials, meeting with local officials, etc.;

- Possible products: a communications plan, fire prevention and education brochures, posters and bumper stickers, an ongoing fire prevention plan, media releases, fact sheets, and typically a final team report.

What are some possible benefits of using a WFPET?

- Reduction in fire occurrence,
- New fire prevention and education products,
- Updated fire prevention assessment,
- New fire prevention plan,
- Updated or new communications plan,
- Improved community relations and fire department relations, and
- Heightened public awareness and education.

What types of funding are available for WFPET?

- For Federal agencies, the use of severity funds;
- Certain types of grant funds; and
- Possibly, fire preparedness or fire mitigation funds.

wish to talk to other agencies or individuals to see what is working for them. Talking to prevention team leaders or members may also be useful.

When the time is right for requesting a team, you now have a general direction, which makes a difference in team composition. If the assignment is media-heavy and will deal with a lot of public contact, your team will need at least two experienced public information officer (PIO) positions. If the assignment is product-heavy, consider the inclusion of a graphic artist for design

and a PIO skilled in writing and editing. A law enforcement officer (LEO) may be part of the team if the direction is to address a specific fire cause such as arson; the LEO can add great insight to the approach of the prevention strategy.

When a team is assigned, talk to the leader before arrival. This gives the team a better idea what to

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expect, allows time for research, and may adjust the team composition. The leader may ask for access to data or other information to get a head start on the objectives.

On arrival, spend enough time at the "in-briefing" to make sure the situation is understood and the assignment is clear. The team will work to make sure the objectives

are obtainable and reasonable within the allotted timeframe. Be available to the team to make decisions, approve products, and monitor the progress. Be willing to quickly adjust the approach and tasks. My experience is that the accomplishments are usually larger than originally planned.

Each of these steps is important, leads to better team utilization, and accomplishes more for the agency. The team should be an extension of the agency prevention program and move the long-term direction of the agency forward. The team is there for 2 weeks; the agency is there for the long haul.

Final Thoughts

Prevention and education teams can be valuable to an agency or interagency group at all levels. State and regional teams are forming in many places and doing great work. As these teams gain experience in their own areas, they become more valuable for national teams. I think it is crucial to involve new members and leaders on each assignment in order to increase national capacity and ensure that trained members are available for local teams. For incoming national teams, trained and experienced local members assist a team by providing local knowledge of the situation, access to community players, and insight on historical prevention efforts.

To make the most of your prevention team, the first thing to decide is your prevention needs.



FIRES BANNED

Due to Wildfire Danger

PERMITTED



Fires inside concrete or metal rings provided at designated recreation sites



Portable stoves and lanterns using liquid petroleum fuels



PROHIBITED



Fires outside designated recreation sites



Charcoal briquettes
Except in grills provided at designated recreation sites.



Fireworks



LEARN MORE AT:

UtahFireInfo.gov

In our most recent assignment, the team developed signage for the local interagency group. By removing the interagency logo and specific Web site information, the products can be used regionally and by other States. The work of prevention and education teams thus can have significant impact beyond the host, in part, because simple messaging transcends the boundaries of a national forest or agency. The overall cost of a prevention and education team is easily justified when there is broad application for the work and when adaptable products become available for others to share and use.

Especially with product work, developing materials that can be used by other States or agencies in general prevention messaging is cost-effective and helps other teams get a faster start to get the public informed and engaged. Teams have been doing this for years. Although I, as a prevention team member, may be highly biased, I feel prevention and education teams provide instrumental assistance needed by agencies to address dangerous situations and reduce the incidence of wildfire from human causes. ■