



# FEMA

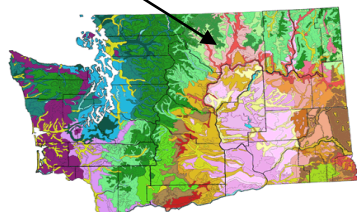
# Best practices

Disaster Mitigation Working in Washington

4188-DR-WA

## Hard Work Builds a Firewise Community

Chiliwist



**Chiliwist Valley, WA** – Peggy and Noble Kelly worked many years to reduce the risk of losing their remote home. They expected that, one day, a wildfire would sweep through their 80 acres of beautiful forest. They live high above the Chiliwist Valley in the Sullivan Creek drainage area of Okanogan County. As Noble says, “You’ve got to be aware that you’re not invincible out here.”

Their work was tested in 2014 when lightning bolts struck the bone dry landscape of north central Washington State, starting four separate fires near Carlton. Fanned by 30 mile-per-hour winds the blazes coalesced to become the Carlton Complex Fire, the largest in state history.

Within days the roaring inferno had grown to 400 square miles. It eventually destroyed approximately 300 homes, along with countless valuable trees, forest floor vegetation, hundreds of cattle, and countless wildlife. The wildfire arrived at the Kelly property as a terrible “firestorm” on the night of July 17th.

The Kellys’ home, treasured possessions, outbuildings,



**Peggy and Noble Kelly with a partially melted and a new Firewise sign**

equipment and infrastructure would all have been lost had they not made major investments in wildfire mitigation. Along with many other chores, Noble had taken on the responsibility for reducing the amount of dangerous wildfire fuel on about 10 acres of land nearest to the house. Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) forestry experts had recommended various Firewise activities, and Noble took his forest stewardship role to heart. Over the years he removed trees that were too close together for fire safety, along



**Devastated area outside Firewise zone**

with smaller trees and other vegetation that could become the “ladder fuel” that allows fire moving along the ground to climb into the mature trees.

Noble used his chainsaw to remove all the tree branches he could reach from the ground. Then, to stay safe, he would carefully climb a ladder and employ a handsaw to cut branches within 12 feet of the forest floor.

Over time, Noble was able to treat and maintain the 10 acres closest to the house. Wildfire fuel reduction on another 13 acres of their land was accomplished with help from a DNR cost-sharing grant program, using contractor labor and equipment. State forest officials see the program as a way to reduce risk to lives and property, improve the health of the forest, and help control the costs of fighting wildland fire.

The DNR program that helped the Kellys includes a requirement that homeowners maintain the work for at least 10 years into the future. Peggy and Noble Kelly are very comfortable with that provision, knowing that Firewise activities are only effective with sustained effort.

The Kellys are also motivated by the knowledge that their work can help reduce risk to the entire community. Peggy is chair of the local Firewise Advisory Committee. The group started with six people, but now meetings may be attended by as many as 50. Noble has this to say about the logic of participating, “If I do what I can on my place and our neighbors do the same, and we help and encourage each other, it makes the whole area much safer for us, and for the firefighters.”

After the worst of the fire all of the neighbors along Golden Rule Road and Old Golden Rule Road returned to find their homes still standing, despite the fact that flames and embers had swept through the entire community. Forty-one other structures in the area did not survive. Neighbors and firefighters worked for another



**Kelly home and Firewise landscape after the 2014 fire**

three weeks to control and contain the remaining fire.

Fortunately, the Kellys and other Firewise participants had created “defensible space” around their homes, along with room for fire fighting equipment to maneuver and safely turn around. The Kellys 500 foot deep well and a battery power backup pumping system were also critical assets in helping the fire fighting crews do their work. Their park-like property became a local base of operations.

For now, at least, brush removal and other forest floor fuel reduction has been taken care of by the fire. In the Firewise treated areas the grasses and other plants are already springing back to life. Unfortunately, because of the extreme heat from the Carlton Complex Fire, most of the trees on the untreated portions of the Kelly property, and for many miles around on public and private land, were either consumed by fire or will not be able to recover. On the forest floor below the standing dead trees, most organic material has burned to a fine white ash.

Peggy has excellent advice for other property owners who want to reduce their risk. “You need to start with an expert assessment to find out what can be done,” she said. “The DNR people will help with that, and along with conservation district experts

and others, you can find out what kinds of plants are safe to have near the house, how to create a buffer, all about fire resistant construction, and much more.”

It’s appropriate that Peggy and Noble live on Old Golden Rule Road. Five weeks after the fire, dangerous flash flooding occurred. Flooding is a common after effect of wildfire. Neighbors watching out for each other activated their phone tree communications plan to start an evacuation from the area before the roads became impassible. They were also able to quickly cancel that message and alert everyone to “secure in place—too dangerous to evacuate” when that was needed.

#### **More information:**

[www.firewise.org](http://www.firewise.org)

[www.fireadapted.org](http://www.fireadapted.org)

**Ready, Set, Go:**  
[www.wildlandfirersg.org/](http://www.wildlandfirersg.org/)

<http://www.dnr.wa.gov/RecreationEducation/FirePreventionAssistance/Pages/Home.aspx>

[www.fema.gov/library](http://www.fema.gov/library/Publication%20#468)  
**Publication # 468 At Home in the Woods—Lessons Learned in the Wildland / Urban Interface**

**Publication # P-805 Protecting Your Home and Property from Flood Damage**