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Texas A&M Forest Service

BRYAN FIRE DEPARTMENT PRODUCES FIRST EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS PLAN OF ITS KIND IN TEXAS

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Many Texans will never forget the wildfires that blazed across the Lone Star State in 2011, challenging the state’s 1,900 local fire departments that serve as the first line of defense.

Three thousand homes were destroyed that year. Four million acres of land burned. Often there simply weren’t enough resources to effectively contain the forces of nature that ravaged wildlands and urban communities.

The situation could have been overwhelming for the Bryan Fire Department, which serves a community of about 76,000 residents.

But instead it was a call to action.

Bryan Fire Chief Randy McGregor assembled a team in 2012 to work alongside Texas A&M Forest Service in developing a Community Wildfire Protection Plan.

“It’s our responsibility to protect our community,” McGregor said. “This wasn’t something we wanted to do; it was something we needed to do.”

A Community Wildfire Protection Plan, or CWPP, identifies wildfire hazards and risks throughout a community and outlines specific strategies for reducing those risks. For example, some neighborhoods in the City of Bryan are in close proximity to large pockets of wildlands, where vegetation can dry out, creating challenging when a wildfire ignites.

Combustible attachments also were identified in some areas, as well as things like minimal access routes and poor signage.

Once the hazards and risks were identified, the group set out to develop mitigation strategies, such as fuels reduction projects, public education campaigns and an ingress/egress plan for high-risk neighborhoods.

“The Bryan Fire Department has some of the sharpest, most innovative guys I’ve ever worked with,” said Jared Karns, a wildland urban interface specialist with Texas A&M Forest Service. “They’ve put a considerable amount of time into working on this plan and tailoring it to suit the needs of this community.”

They also got creative along the way and decided they wanted to do more than a CWPP.

The team’s drive and determination resulted in the first Pre-Attack Plan in Texas. The plan – a spiral pocket guide – includes information firefighters can use to size up a wildfire in the city. It could be particularly beneficial to mutual aid responders who may not be familiar with the area. The plan outlines tactics for fighting wildfire in each of Bryan’s five response zones, detailing fuel types, water sources, staging areas, evacuation considerations and contingency plans for each region.

“It’s incredibly valuable information for responding firefighters, and it didn’t exist collectively on paper anywhere,” Karns said. “This could potentially help responders identify their plan of attack before they even get to the fire. At the end of the day, it ensures a safer, more efficient wildfire response.”

If mutual aid is called to a wildfire in Bryan, firefighters can pick up a Pre-Attack Plan when they check into the incident. If, for example, the fire was burning around Newton Street in Response Zone One, emergency responders could flip to that section of the plan.

They could then determine that the area is surrounded by a 450-acre area of wildlands. The heavy fuel loading includes grass, juniper and oak, and most of the homes in the area are built with ignition-resistant materials but have combustible attachments.

The Pre-Attack Plan also outlines values at risk in the area, hydrants and other water sources, watch-out situations and evacuation trigger points.

“This is the type of information that sometimes takes several hours to determine when you’re thrown into an incident, and unfortunately sometimes homes are destroyed because responders don’t have all the tools they need to properly suppress the fire,” Karns said. “It’s very forward-thinking for the City of Bryan to prepare for the next big wildfire long before it happens.”

A TRAGIC TURN OF EVENTS

Two months after Bryan began gathering data for its CWPP and Pre-Attack Plan, news of a late-night fire at the Knights of Columbus Hall rocked the city. Text messages, Facebook posts and tearful phone calls shared the text messages, Facebook posts and tearful phone calls shared the terrible news.

Later that day, another firefighter’s life was claimed.

Two others remain in a Galveston burn unit recovering from injuries sustained on the night of the fire.

One of the first responders that fateful February evening was Lt. Eric Wallace, a member of Bryan’s Community Wildfire Protection Plan working group.

Lt. Wallace led Texas A&M Forest Service officials in conducting risk assessments for the Fire Station One response zone.

Wallace was known around the fire department for his initiative. He volunteered to be the BFD’s HazMat response coordinator, served on the apparatus committee, helped teach Citizen Fire Academy courses and worked with youth every summer.

Wallace believed in what the CWPP set out to accomplish and took an aggressive approach to learning wildland firefighting terminology and tactics.

At the 36-year-old’s funeral, less than two weeks after he spearheaded the risk assessments for his Station One response zone, Chief McGregor acknowledged the need to finish the projects.

“There’s an inscription in the front of the CWPP that dedicates the plan to our fallen firefighters,” McGregor said. “But what that means to us is that we have to roll up our sleeves and ensure that we carry it out and we make the City of Bryan a safer community.”

In its darkest hour, the Bryan Fire Department emerged from the ashes with a plan in place, a plan that will guide firefighters and potentially serve as a model for other departments to emulate.

To learn more about creating a Community Wildfire Protection Plan or Pre-Attack Plan Plan, visit texasfirewise.org.