



**FIREWISE USA®**  
RESIDENTS REDUCING WILDFIRE RISKS

## From Awareness to Action, an Ohio Community's Wildfire Preparedness Journey

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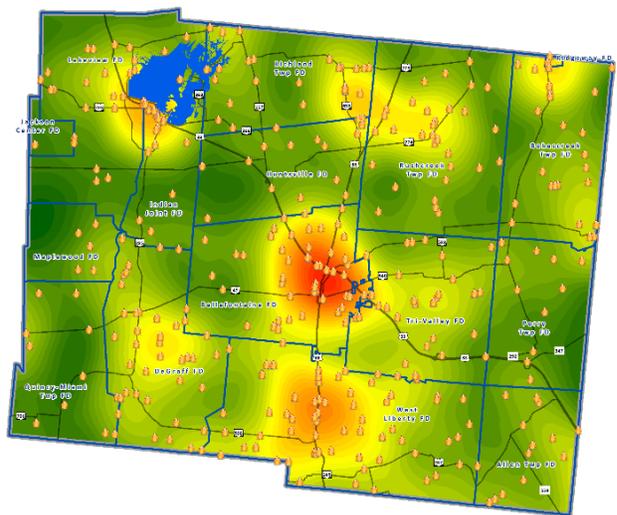
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At the end of 2017, the [Firewise USA® Recognition Program](#) welcomed a second community from Ohio: the Bellefontaine Fire Department – Rural Protection Area. Because this is not an area that typically comes to my mind as having a wildfire risk, I reached out to Jeremy Keller—resident leader, Rural Operations Coordinator, volunteer member of the fire department, and from what I gathered, the community's spark plug for wildfire preparedness—to learn about the conditions and their journey.

Bellefontaine is located in Logan County, an area that is primarily rural with a focus on agriculture. The landscape is largely dominated by crops, with pockets of land under the Conservation Reserve Program and hills covered in oak and brush. Several years ago Jeremy observed that there was “a noticeable hole in the Midwest of participation in Firewise® and in the general wildfire conversation.” While the threat isn't as high or extreme as other areas, there is still a threat—his county sees an average of 45 wildfires a year, primarily in the spring and fall. The majority of these fires are caused by humans and can present a danger to homes, property, and the landscape.

To get the conversation going at the local level and get buy in for pursuing an engagement program, Jeremy used visualizations of the fire occurrence data for that area. He recommends this approach to others trying to start wildfire preparedness programs in areas that have risk, but maybe not extensive wildfire activity. Being able to see the fires on a map can alert people to the concept that yes, there is a problem.

The first step after gaining support for action was implementation of an awareness campaign. In 2016, the [Bellefontaine Fire Department](#) participated in its first Wildfire Community Preparedness Day. They took the message to the people, hosting an event at the local tractor supply store where many of the local residents can be found on a Saturday. With the support of an inflatable Smokey Bear display provided by the Ohio Division of Forestry, staff were able to draw in children, parents, and other folks to have a conversation and hand out materials specific to wildfire risk reduction. The event has continued each year since and was a State Farm-funding awardee in 2018.



*Logan County wildfire occurrences. (Graphic courtesy of Jeremy Keller)*

As interest has grown, the fire department has expanded its focus beyond general awareness of wildfire. The department is involved with a prescribed fire program at the nearby Myreeh Nature Preserve. This provides an opportunity to demonstrate the value of prescribed fire as a tool and fire service training. Within the county, improvements are being made that support a more effective fire response—installation of bridge-mounted, swiveling dry hydrants that allow for easier drafting from the rivers below.



*Wildfire Hazard Awareness Poster (Courtesy of Jeremy Keller  
<http://www.ohioburning.org/risk-reduction/>)*

Whether promoting Prep Day or giving notice about a prescribed burn, Jeremy uses a “full-court press” to share information via social media, radio, and news. To deliver the message on the ground, Jeremy has found that using the fire department model to engage residents is best—they are a trusted community resource, and if they speak about the wildfire risk, people are most likely to believe them above others.

The approach used by Jeremy—starting with awareness; utilizing the fire department, a trusted resource in the community, as the method for delivering the messaging; and bringing together a small group of residents that support risk reduction and building to education and action—has proven to be successful. Another fire department within the county has two neighborhoods that are interested in the program.

While Bellefontaine is still young in its Firewise USA® participation, they are proving to be quite the leader in Logan County. I’m excited to read about future (Firewise USA program) renewals as they move forward with education specific to mitigation – how to integrate risk reduction within residential and farmstead structures, and then take action.

View these other resources: [www.firewise.org](http://www.firewise.org) and [www.firewiselogan.org](http://www.firewiselogan.org).