

Safer Homes and Healthy Waters

Lakeside Maine Residents Becoming LakeSmart and Firewise

The Challenge

There are more than 6,000 lakes and ponds in Maine that collectively have over 20,000 year-round and seasonal homes on their shores. These homes range from traditional seasonal “camps” to multimillion dollar year-round residences. All of these homes are located in the wildland-urban interface.

Forest Rangers have assessed the fire risk in a representative sample of lake association communities in Maine. They have described the fire risk in these communities as “moderate”, “high”, and, in some cases, “extreme”. All of these communities share two characteristics: a lack of defensible space around homes and inadequate access roads.

There are a number of laws—Shoreland Zoning Act, Erosion and Sedimentation Control Law, Natural Resources Protection Act, local zoning laws, and lake association bylaws—that restrict what lakeside homeowners can do to manage their vegetation. Homeowners also frequently receive inconsistent advice from State and local agencies. As a result, many homeowners frequently choose to do nothing, which puts their homes at increased risk from wildfire. Some recent recommendations from the Maine Department of Environmental Protection encouraged homeowners to increase vegetation around their homes, reduce the size of their lawns, and not mow the lawn or rake leaves and pine needles from their yard. Although these recommendations were made to prevent runoff from degrading water quality, they can also cause a home to be at higher risk from wildland fire.

The Solution

The Maine Department of Environmental Protection and the Maine Forest Service jointly produced a brochure—How to be LakeSmart & Firewise—that helps homeowners maintain and improve water quality and protect their camps and homes from wildfire by following Firewise principles around their home. This brochure lists actions that homeowners can take to accomplish both goals.

As an example, one of the brochure’s recommendations involves shore footpaths that lead to the water. Homeowners are encouraged to use gravel instead of flammable mulch to reduce the fire risk, and make these paths stable and winding to reduce erosion and runoff. In Maine, where surface fires are the most common type of fire, these footpaths also serve as fire breaks between pockets of vegetation, which could potentially prevent a wildland fire from reaching homes.



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The How to be LakeSmart & Firewise brochure addresses concerns about both clean water and reducing the threat from wildland fire. Download the brochure at http://www.maine.gov/doc/mfs/fpd/downloads/lakesmart_firewise_brochure.pdf.

Resulting Benefits

- The Maine Forest Service is working with lake associations and local fire departments to develop Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs). Interest in this program has been overwhelming; more than 50 lake associations have requested a risk assessment or more information.
- More than 5,000 How to be LakeSmart & Firewise brochures have been mailed to lake association residents throughout Maine.
- The [Maine Forest Service Defensible Space Fuel Reduction Program](#) is being offered to participating communities to help homeowners remove and dispose of hazardous fuels around their home.
- The Maine Forest Service is working with lake associations to apply for recognition in the [Firewise](#) program.

Sharing Success

- Forest Rangers are sharing educational materials and holding public meetings to recommend measures that homeowners and communities can take to reduce the ignitability of structures.
- Defensible space educational materials have been developed and distributed to homeowners. [Click here to view a video about defensible space.](#)



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