

**Public Safety
Program Excellence
Award in Memory of
William H. Hansell, Sr.,
and Alice Hansell**

POPULATIONS OF 10,000 TO 49,999

Los Alamos, New Mexico

The 2004 Public Safety Program Excellence Award in the 10,000-to-49,999 population category goes to the county of Los Alamos, New Mexico, and to Max H. Baker, Deputy County Administrator, for the county's Defensible Space project.



In May 2000, the Cerro Grande wildfire swept through the mountainside community of Los Alamos, burning more than 47,000 acres, destroying

235 structures in Los Alamos and 112 structures at the Los Alamos National Laboratory, forcing 18,000 residents to be evacuated, and leaving 403 families homeless. As the citizens struggled to put their lives back together, county officials realized that proactive steps were needed to protect this wildland-urban interface (WUI) community from future wildland fires.

In the days following the fire, the Los Alamos Fire Department (LAFD) and other agencies sought to determine why some homes survived the wildfire while others did not. One of their most important findings was that the proper structuring of vegetation near homes could not only significantly reduce the likelihood that homes would ignite but also provide a less hazardous working zone for firefighters. Because the high density of structures and small lot size throughout the county made vegetation on any given property a threat to a neighboring home, any program to mitigate wildfire hazards had to be community-wide to be truly effective.

Under the guidance of previous County Administrator Mary M. McInerney, Deputy County Administrator Max Baker, and the Los Alamos County Council, the LAFD

began to develop a comprehensive mitigation program for property owners in the event of another major wildfire. In August 2002, the Los Alamos County (pop. 18,000) Defensible Space Project moved from concept to reality when the county council approved the multi-million-dollar project, which focused primarily on restructuring vegetation around the highest-hazard perimeter areas.

The project was created to improve the community's defensibility and survivability and to enhance firefighter and resident safety during a wildfire by modifying and thinning vegetation on private property, thus interrupting potential fire paths from the surrounding wildland to homes while maintaining a balance of aesthetics and safety on the property. Because the effort's success depended on the majority of property owners participating in this voluntary program, a very active public relations and education program (which included public meetings, neighborhood block parties, newspaper articles and advertisements, and a project Web site) was essential.

At the outset, 2,700 high-risk perimeter properties were identified as project candidates. Each property was treated as an individual "mini-project," requiring a defensible-space custom-design plan created in conjunction with the property owner. One of the most valuable aspects of the public education program was the one-on-one appointments that property owners had with project planners



Mascot "Reddy Squirrel" greets kids during Defensible Space Day events in April 2004.

to discuss defensible-space concepts specific to their properties.

The mitigation portion of the Los Alamos County Defensible Space Project was completed in December 2003, on schedule and under budget. Although the scope of the original project embraced only those properties in Los Alamos, the community of White Rock was added in July 2003. In the end, more than 3,400 homes were included in the project and nearly 70 percent of eligible property owners participated.

Before-and-after evaluations of the Los Alamos and White Rock wildfire risk ratings revealed that the project had reduced the hazard rating for both communities by 60 percent of the total reduction possible. The project also successfully educated the community on the importance of defensible space. A toll-free number was set up so residents can call with questions about wildfire preparedness, and staff continue to update the project's Web site with relevant information. Additionally, the LAFD has proactively shared its methods, tools, and lessons learned with other communities.

Today, Los Alamos County residents are working to protect their homes and their community from

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wildland fires; even the children participate in local programs and classroom exercises geared toward promoting defensible space principles. Property owners have come to recognize that by working together they can retain the beauty and solitude that come with living in a WUI community while minimizing the risks of wildland fires. ■