



Taking on Excellence: Wisconsin



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For this next edition of our Sites of Excellence highlight, we head to Crystal Lake Club in Wisconsin. Bill Santer II shares the journey his community has taken on the wildfire risk reduction path.

Crystal Lake Club (CLC) is in the north central portion of Marquette County, Wisconsin in a geographical area known as the Central Sands. The location is determined to be in a high-risk area for wildfires. This

area is famous for Aldo Leopold's, Sand County Almanac, and the boyhood home of John Muir. The environs are credited with inspiring Muir to his lifelong passion for the environment.

Seventy-five residences line the Crystal Lake shoreline, the homes are occupied seasonally (75%) and year-round (25%). The lake association, CLC, with a membership of 130, owns 1,026 acres surrounding Crystal Lake. The common lands are primarily used for forestry, habitat and recreation, with areas designated for golf, tennis, pickle ball, hiking, trap and skeet shooting, pistol range, cross country skiing and frisbee golf. Crystal Lake is a 124-acre, spring-fed lake, with a maximum depth of 60 feet. There is a public access location on the lake, made available by a walk-in trail. Crystal Lake, the Mekan River and Weddle Creek provide water for suppression efforts.

Two dry hydrants were installed in the nearby area within the past few years. All homes have private wells. The club maintains four alarms around the lake shore to alert Club members in case of a wildfire or other emergency. A designated debris pile site eliminates the need to burn debris on individual properties. CLC falls within the Montello Fire Response Unit (FRU) with the Montello Ranger Station located in Montello approximately 12 miles to the south. The Wautoma Ranger Station is located approximately 9 miles to the north. Access from both stations is via Highway 22, which is one mile east of the development. The personnel and equipment of both stations are available for fire response in an emergency. The fire department serving the Crystal Lake community is the Neshkoro Volunteer Fire Department.



The vast majority of residents have been on the lake since birth. Most are daughters and sons of original owners. Others are long-time friends of owners and/or nieces and nephews of original owners. The Caribbean blue/green water, great fishing, banning gasoline powered engines, the smell of the pines, the nesting eagles, egrets, herons and sandhill cranes, the abundant white tail deer, the undeveloped surroundings that are only a short drive to the state capital and other major city centers, makes CLC an oasis of peace and tranquility where neighbors share and support common values of stewardship and conservation.

Tell me about your community's journey in wildfire risk reduction. What led you to Firewise USA? Why did you decide to participate in the pilot?

We got a “wake-up call” on April 13, 2003. That day the weather was partly cloudy, temperature 82-83 degrees (unusually hot for a Wisconsin April), minimum humidity at 25%, SW winds at 15 MPH increasing to 25 MPH in the afternoon. The CLC (township) Fire started within a quarter mile of our club lands around 2 pm. By the next day 572 acres burned, 6 structures were lost, and 49 other structures threatened. Two CLC members immediately recognized future danger and contacted our state DNR. The CLC Firewise Committee was formed in 2003, with Firewise Community status earned in 2004, the first site in Wisconsin.

The initial Firewise Community Assessment was conducted on Sept. 8, 2003, again on June 15, 2013 and most recently June 26, 2018. Dynamic action plans were developed from each assessment. Priorities for each year’s activities are drawn from the action plan. The committee currently has five club members, chaired by Bill Santner II. We have a workday in the spring and fall of each year. Upwards of 90 people work on Club land projects during the workdays, as well as individually throughout the year. We sponsor a lunch in the fall as a thank you for the members efforts and provide educational materials, presentations and updates on Firewise efforts within club lands.

When asked if we would like to be considered as a Site of Excellence for this pilot program, the committee was unanimous in agreement to apply for this distinction. We see it as a way to learn and grow in our knowledge base and to network with other communities to share best practices to keep our members and their investments as safe as possible from the dangers of wildfires.

What are your goals in the pilot?

CLC has two specific goals for the Sites of Excellence 2-year pilot program. First, within the first year of the program, the goal is to get as many residences as possible to agree to have a Home Ignition Zone assessment. By the way, we realized that people don’t react favorably to the word “assessment.” So, we now label it the “Fire Safety Check-Up.” The second goal, in the second year, is to follow-up, encourage and support, and record the work done based on the residences’ fire safety check-up report. Updates and results will continue to be reported to the membership.

What are some challenges you think you might face? How do you propose to overcome them?

Some of our members have the perception that “outsiders” will come on their property and tell them what must be done. The only way to overcome this is to continue education efforts and have participating members share their favorable experiences. Another challenge is to engage with absentee owner/members. There are few at CLC, but still critical to get those involved. We continue to do outreach through emailed newsletters, etc.

What else would you like to share?

We are grateful for the training and support received from NFPA and our [state DNR and Forestry](#) personnel. We are confident that this pilot program will make our club more aware of wildfire

dangers and more proactive in protecting our land and dwellings. One member put it this way: “Doing the work around our home is like getting a vaccination. It’s for our own good, but also for the protection of the community. What we do around our home helps protect those homes around us.” We believe that’s a great metaphor for the work to be done.



Thank you Bill for sharing your story. We appreciate Crystal Lake Club's commitment to personal responsibility and look forward to your progress over the next year.

Is your community ready to take the next step in wildfire risk reduction? Visit [Firewise.org](https://www.firewise.org) to learn more about how to organize your neighbors and get started.

Photo credit: all photos provided by Bill Santner II, resident leader