

The 19th Watchout

Treating a WUI fire like a structure fire

By Brad Mayhew



AUTHOR NOTE:

The 18 Watchouts are designed to help firefighters recognize warning signs and potential pitfalls in the wildland and wildland/urban interface (WUI) arenas. In addition to the official 18 Watchouts, some firefighters have their own personal “watchout” situations based on their experiences. In this article, I’ll discuss what I call the 19th Watchout: Treating a WUI fire like a structural fire.



One huge pitfall among firefighters occurs when professionals accustomed to fire behavior in one part of the country travel to another area and subconsciously expect the fires in the new area to behave like the ones they’re accustomed to.

The cues that mean one thing back home may mean something different just miles away, as though the fire speaks a different local dialect. As a result, the tactics and mindset that make firefighters effective in their home district may work against them in a different location, with its unique local factors and fire dynamics. This sometimes requires a conscious effort to mentally shift gears.

This same pitfall can ensnare firefighters who are accustomed to specific types of structure fires, rescues, medical calls and traffic collisions. Each of these calls has its own specific risks, complexities, demands and dynamic variables. Yet the very same mindsets, habits and attitudes that make for successful operations on these types of calls can work against you on a wildland/urban interface (WUI) fire.

INSTINCT & MOMENTUM

As you respond to any fire—structural or WUI—the first priority is rescue, which has its own level of urgency and acceptable risk, as you determine whether there are lives at stake at your location. But once this is addressed, the assignment transitions from rescue to structure protection or some other level of engagement, which prompts a shift in tactics, priorities and acceptable risk.

But human beings are creatures of momentum, so it can be unnatural to mentally transition out of rescue mode (with its specific focus, urgency, adrenaline and acceptable level of risk) and into some new level of engagement where your best move might be to relocate to somewhere distant from the emerging problem and just ... wait. This requires a mental

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pivot from what you were doing just moments before, and it runs against the grain of what firefighters do on the vast majority of assignments.

In a structure fire, rescue, traffic collision or medical call, time is of the essence; minutes and seconds can make all the difference in the survival of victims. The instinct then is to get close to the problem quickly, and *do something*.

Yet, this same sense of urgency can interfere with effective decision-making in the WUI. There may be little opportunity to do any good at the fire front, and it may take time to build a mental picture of where you'll have a chance to be effective. Even as you're figuring out what the fire is doing, it's changing. And as you're taking the time to build and adjust your plan, there's an added stress—it feels like you're doing the worst thing of all: *nothing*.

AVOIDING THE PITFALL

One firefighter I've worked with told me how he tries to avoid the momentum pitfall: "I know that when I go to an interface fire, it's a different animal than what I deal with 90 percent of the time," he explains. "For me, the 19th Watchout is *'treating an interface fire like a structure fire.'*

"It took me years to figure this out," he continues, "but now, as soon as I put on my wildland gear, I make

the conscious effort to recognize that this is different from other calls, and that I need to mentally shift gears to operate successfully."

He shared some of the ways that he thinks WUI fires differ from structure fires. These points may be worth discussing as you prepare for the upcoming fire season.

- A structure fire is fundamentally a "fire in a box."

Your situational awareness focuses on and encompasses this box and the immediate area. There may be surprises and unknowns, but the problem is relatively well defined and contained "in there."

- A WUI fire is the opposite. The fire is "out there" somewhere, but you don't know when it will arrive, or how intense it may be, or where it will approach from. It may make a push right for you, or it might spot well ahead of the fire front and beyond your location, then approach from a direction you're not expecting. Or there may be area ignition, where an entire canyon combusts simultaneously. Your situational awareness and strategy may need to spread out over several miles, and your fire behavior expectations may need to spread out over several days.

- On a WUI fire, depending on conditions, it may take hours to gather information and build a 3-D picture that's complete enough to allow you to engage effectively. This doesn't feel right, because it doesn't take hours to size up a structure fire ►



and make a decision. It can't. On a structure fire or rescue, the time demands and potential values at stake create a highly compressed timeline and require immediate action.

- During a structure fire, most of the factors that affect the fire are already right there, in the box. But on a WUI fire, there may be
 1. Variables that are elusive, distant, ambiguous and weird (e.g., a seemingly irrelevant weather event miles away can affect fire behavior at your location).
 2. Variables that are more erratic (e.g., wind can make a 180-degree shift in an instant and without warning. Weird micro-local weather patterns can come and go unpredictably. The fire could move in any direction).
 3. Dramatic consequences caused by subtle changes (e.g., a slight wind shift can change

your fire drastically. Fire intensity responds exponentially to changes in wind speed).

4. Hazards that lay dormant for hours or days, doing nothing, creating a deceptive sense of comfort, before suddenly springing to life all at once.

A FINAL WORD

As mentioned before, structure fires have their own complexities, demands and hazards (e.g., hazmat, illegal construction techniques, overloading, highly flammable contents). It's also true that structure fires and the WUI have many things in common; the intent here is to highlight some of the differences between the WUI and structural operating environments, and to focus on some of the ways that you might mentally recalibrate when you shift from one to the other. 🔄

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Questions to Ask

Here are some group discussion questions as you prepare for the fire season:

1. Does this article's description of the WUI ring true to your experience? Does it miss anything? If so, what?
2. What do you already do to mentally recalibrate when you shift from one operational environment (or task or role) to another?

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