

Log Hill fire prep wins national nod

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Log Hill's assistant fire chief collected a national award this week, but says the wildfire preparedness projects for which he was honored were a collaborative effort.

"It was a surprise," Log Hill Volunteer Fire Department Assistant Chief Tom Austin said, of receiving a Fire Adapted Communities Fire Service Leadership Award.

"I didn't even know I had been nominated for it. It's kind of humbling, because I

think this is a collaborative effort where we've been able to work with a lot of great people in this area," Austin said. "It's really a lot of work by a lot of different people."

Austin's was a 2016 Fire Mitigation Award; these are awarded each year as the highest commendation for innovation and leadership on the part of people and organizations when it comes to wildfire preparedness and mitigation.

The awards are sponsored by the National Association of State Foresters, the International Association

of Fire Chiefs, the National Fire Protection Association and the U.S. Forest Service.

Austin, a retired Army veteran who has been with Log Hill Fire Protection District for 13 years, is one of four award recipients. He was nominated by the West Region Wildfire Council because of his many dedicated hours to promoting fire adaptedness within the Log Hill Fire District, Lilia Colter Falk, WRWC's director, said in a news release.

"We've been working up here on Log Hill Mesa for five or six years, promoting all

sorts of things to help permit a fire-adaptive community. It includes a lot of mitigation work," Austin said.

"As part of the fire department, we've developed a comprehensive evacuation plan, and community wildfire protection plan, in which we surveyed every home in the district."

The fire district provided information to the homeowners about how to make their structures safer from blazes, and also used the information to develop an initial attack plan

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in case a wildfire sweeps through the area.

"This award really is more about a collection of work by a lot of people up here, everything from homeowners in Log Hill, to the fire district, to the West Region Wildfire Council. A lot of what we've done is leverage resources that they (the council) offer," Austin said.

The WRWC is composed of several agencies and entities in Montrose, Delta, Gunnison, Ouray, San Miguel and Hinsdale counties. It promotes wildfire preparedness, prevention and mitigation education, and operates a grant program and technical assistance to people and individuals to reduce wildfire risk.

Log Hill was the first entity to contract with the WRWC to develop a community wildfire protection plan when



Lilia Colter Frank, of the West Region Wildfire Council, congratulates Log Hill Volunteer Fire Department Assistant Chief Tom Austin on receiving a Fire Adapted Communities Fire Service Leadership Award. (Courtesy Photo)

the council began offering such opportunities, Austin said.

"What we've been lucky to do is leverage a lot of programs that they have and it's really made this place a lot safer," he said.

"Tom's efforts have helped Log Hill become

an exemplary model for other communities to follow," Colter Falk said.

The Wildfire Mitigation Awards committee also honored Peggy Beach, a volunteer for Durango-based Firewise Southwest Colorado, as a Community Wildfire Preparedness Pioneer.

Information about fire preparedness and opportunities for assistance can be found at cowildfire.org.

"The best thing homeowners can do out here is take responsibility for their property and any preparation they can do, between mitigation, hardening the structure they live in, or as simple as raking up fine needles every year," Austin said. "That goes a long way to protecting the structures up here, and it makes it a lot easier for our firefighters to protect those structures if we have a big fire."