

Wildfire preparation for your property



Tips
from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

California has endured a fire season of unbelievable destruction, with 9,000 fires burning 1.2 million acres of land. That is an area the size of the state of Delaware. These fires destroyed 10,800 structures and killed 46 people.

One of the California fires, the Thomas Fire, grew to 31,000 acres in just nine hours. That is an acre per second, folks. At that speed, a fire would consume the Montrose metropolitan area in around 30 minutes or less.

Don't think that Colorado is exempt. On June 23, 2012, the Waldo Canyon fire began, just a few miles from Colorado Springs. When it was finally contained it had consumed 18,247 acres and destroyed 346 homes. There were 32,000 residents evacuated from their homes. Insurance claims exceeded \$450 million. Then, a year later, the Black Forest Fire destroyed 486 homes. This became the costliest fire in Colorado history.

Wildfires are probably the most likely disaster we may face here in Western Colorado, especially with as dry of a winter we experienced. Many are caused by lightning strikes but the sad truth is that most are caused by careless acts of people. While there is nothing you can do to control or prevent a wildfire from approaching your property, there are steps you can take to minimize potential damage.

The responsibility of minimizing the damage from a fire begins with you, the homeowner and the time to take these steps is long before a fire starts. Taking these steps will make your home more defensible in the event of a fire.

Many people rely on the firefighters to protect their homes. The sad truth is, while they will do their very best, there may be little they can do. Fires the size of what California has experienced are way above what we have the resources to combat.

There are other agencies, including the Federal Government, who will respond, but even so, it may not be enough. Depending upon the nature of a particular fire, the firefighters might not be able to even get to your property. Therefore, the first steps in making your home and property defensible are up to you.

One of the reasons we all live here in Montrose is the close proximity of the

forestlands. These beautifully treed landscapes surround our community and spread in all directions from town. As more people move into the area, we encroach unto these lands, building homes and subdivisions amongst these forests. The deeper into the woods we build our homes, the further away from assistance we become, and the more susceptible to destruction by fire we are. For us, it is not a question of if we will have a wildfire, but more of a question of when.

Begin by doing a study of your home and property. The little things can make all the difference for the survivability of your property. Start with the roof. It should be made of a nonflammable material such as metal. Some types of shingles are good while wood shakes are the worst. Always keep your roof and gutters clean and free from debris such as pine needles and dead leaves, because their presence can cause blowing embers to ignite your home.

Beware of attachments to the house such as untreated wooden decks. These are very vulnerable and should also be kept cleaned underneath of all debris. During fire season remove large potential heat sources such as piles of firewood, deck furniture, vehicles-anything that could catch embers or ignite by flames needs to be as faraway from the dwelling as possible. A propane tank is of special concern and should be located as far from the home as possible, keeping the area around it clear also.

Make a list of the contents of your home. The list should include the serial numbers of the valuable items. This can be helpful in the event you have to make an insurance claim. We take pictures of every room and all the contents and store the file of pictures in a fire-proof safe.

I would think that having insurance is a no brainer, but review your coverage with your agent. Be sure you have enough coverage for contents and to rebuild. Make certain there is coverage for living somewhere else while the home is repaired.

Heading back outside the home, consider the first ten feet or so that surround it. Organic mulch, woody shrubs, and juniper bushes all could ignite and thus allow flames to touch the house. Wind driven fire will create a blizzard of embers that will pile up in corners where you might have accumulations of leaves or needles around your home. These corners, nooks and crannies should be clear of any flammables. If there are any limbs or branches overhanging the roof, or close to the house, they should be trimmed back at least 10 feet, further if possible. Keep your grass mowed low and well watered.

Create fuel breaks such as driveways,



(Above) Fire crews like this will do what they can to protect your property, but mitigation starts with you. (Right) Fire season is here and you should be taking steps now to make sure your property will survive a wildfire. Here are a few things you can do. (Submitted photo/ Paul Martin)

gravel walkways and lawns. Keep all trees and shrubs pruned at least 6 to 10 feet above the ground. Carrying this thinking out further away from the house, the next area to consider is that which may extend up to two hundred feet away.

This area should be kept as thinned out as possible but because of varying factors such as topography, the recommended distance to mitigate for radiant heat exposure could actually extend beyond this distance. In this area, remove smaller trees that are growing between the taller ones. Remove taller trees to reduce the density so that none of the canopies are touching. The space between taller trees is important in the event the fire is in the canopies of the trees. Again, all woody and flammable material accumulated on the ground should be removed and all the trees and shrubs must be trimmed 6 to 10 feet from the ground.

Every family should have a bug out bag. This is an emergency kit you should have prepared with emergency supplies, food, water, first aid equipment, prescription medicines, important papers and insurance information.

If you have pets, have a bug out bag for them as well. Decide well in advance of fire season what you are taking with you and where you are going to evacuate. Have a plan in place, for you and family members, to meet in case you are not together when the fire strikes. Work with a neighbor to evacuate your pets in case you are not able to return home during a fire.

When there is an active fire in the area pay



close attention to the emergency channels and always know the status of the fire. Fires change constantly with the ever-changing weather conditions. The larger that a wildfire becomes, the more unpredictable it is. A sizeable fire can actually create it's own weather, to include storm force wind driven ember blizzards advancing far out in front of the actual fire.

It has been quite a number of years since a wildfire has threatened the Montrose area. As I had stated earlier in this article, it is not a question of "if" but a question of "when." As the number of years since such a fire widens, so does the complacency of the citizens. It is this complacency that gets homes destroyed and people killed.

I am a survivor of many hurricanes, including Andrew, Wilma and Katrina, and have seen first hand what happens to people who are not prepared for an emergency. Make sure you and your families are prepared.

Further information is available at firewise.org. Until next time, stay safe and prepared, and see you on the trail.

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