

WILDLAND FIRES NEAR PROPERTIES AT RISK

Since the early 1970's, people have become more aware of the environment. Earth Day, established in 1970, focused public attention on our natural resources. With increased awareness, many people are choosing to make their home in the forest environment. The move from the city, to the suburbs is now expanding to rural landscapes. Wildland firefighters are extremely aware of the potential for homes in the path of wildfires to be destroyed. The 1990 Oakland-Berkley Hills wildfire brought the problem to a head. Firefighters, both wildland and structural, were hampered in their efforts by narrow roads, steep topography, while people were being evacuated. To complicate the situation homeowners were evacuating at the same time the firefighters were trying to get into the area.

Although wildland urban interface fires are not new, they are now in the forefront. Census figures over the past 20 years show more and more people moving from the suburban to the rural areas to find their own "piece of heaven." Local governments in rural areas, must now deal with more families expecting urban/metropolitan services. The tax base, as well as the infrastructure, cannot support what is being asked.

Also people moving into the wildland urban interface are not familiar with their environment. They make choices which increase the potential for their homes to be destroyed in the event of a wildfire. Many forested areas on the east coast have been logged and subdivided into building lots. Fuels such as logging slash and volatile understory vegetation are left on site, increasing the potential for wildfires. In addition with more people, there is increased risk of fires caused by people...debris burning, equipment use, smoking, campfires and arson.

What is the Wildland Urban Interface?

The National Fire Protection Association defines the Wildland Urban Interface as:

The line, area or zone where structures and other human development meet or intermingle with undeveloped wildland or vegetative fuels.



Follow these simple guidelines to make your structure more likely to survive a wildfire

- Roofing Material: choose non-combustible, Class A Roofing Material.
- Siding Material: choose non-combustible siding and lining.
- Window Construction: choose double pane windows for both insulating properties as well as durability.
- Building Design: use 1/8" screening over eaves, vents, attachments to keep out leaves, and burning embers. Keep spouting clean of dead leaves and pine needles.
- Vegetation modification: remove ladder fuels and combustible vegetation within 30 feet of structures. Keep lawn mowed.
- Heating plant: keep chimney screened. Place propane tanks and firewood at least 30 feet from structure.
- Accessibility: make sure your house number is clearly visible, keep driveway accessible for fire equipment.

These are suggestions for Firewise Activities within the first 30 feet of the structure. You can find out more information at the Firewise website: www.firewise.org.

Properties at Risk Teaching Activity

Teaching Idea: Fire Audit--access your property to see if it meets FireWise guidelines.

Auditing your home and woods for fire safety, being ready for a fire is the best protection. In order to conduct the audit you will need to know how to determine distance and height.

1. Using your pace to determine a distance:

- Find a straight and level place at least 100 feet long.
- Place a stake in the ground or make a mark with chalk on pavement. Place another stake or make another mark 100 feet from the first stake or mark.
- You will be counting paces as you walk. A pace is two steps long. If you start walking with your right foot, you will count each time your left foot hits the ground.
- Walking at a normal speed, count how many paces it takes to go 100 feet.
- Repeat a few times to make sure your numbers are consistent.
- Divide 100 by the number of paces to get your pace length.

An example: if you took 20 paces to cover the 100 feet, then 100 feet divided by 20 paces would equal a 5 foot pace length. To determine if your safety zone was at least 30 feet wide you would need to walk 6 paces.

2. Determining branch height or tree height using a person of known height:

- Stand a person whose height is known next to the tree you are measuring.
- With your arm straight hold a pen or pencil at eye level.
- Move away from the tree until the person standing at the tree fits exactly between the top and bottom of the pen or pencil.
- Count the number of pen or pencil lengths from the ground to where branches begin or to the top of the tree.
- Multiply the number of pen or pencil lengths by the height of the person standing next to the tree to get the branch or tree height.

An example: if you are 5-feet tall, the child would need to have 2 pen or pencil heights or more without branches on the tree trunk to have the 10-foot minimum branch free trunk in the fire safety zone.

You'll need:

- A copy of the Fire Audit Sheet
- Pens or pencils
- Tape measure
- Pruning shears.

Fire Audit

*If your house is on flat or gently sloping ground, your safety zone is 30 feet.

*If your house is on 30 percent or greater slope, your safety zone is 100 feet or more down hill from your house.

Safety zone is covered by a green lawn without sticks and leaves. _____yes _____no

If no, plant lawn and/or pick up sticks and other debris.

Trees in the safety zone are pruned to a height of about 10 feet. _____yes _____no

If no, prune trees, but be sure to leave 50 percent of the tree height in live branches to maintain healthy tree growth.

Tree crowns in the safety zone are at least 16 feet apart. _____yes _____no

If no, cut down individual trees with crowns that are too close.

Firewood and other burnable materials are at least 30 feet away from buildings. _____yes _____no

If no, then move firewood or other items.

Gutters, eaves and roof are clear of leaves or other debris. _____yes _____no

In no, remove the leaves and debris.

Branches around your chimney, dead branches hanging over your roof, or branches that may come in contact with power lines. _____yes _____no

If yes, prune trees. Note: hire a professional to prune branches near power lines.

House number is posted in large letters and numbers at start of driveway. _____yes _____no

If no, purchase or make a reflective house address sign.

Driveway is at least 12 feet wide, a vertical clearance of 15 feet, and a turn-around at the house.

_____yes _____no

If no, consider making access to your house easier.

Emergency fire numbers are posted by the phone, the fire escape plan is practiced. _____yes _____no

If no, post numbers and plan and practice your escape route now!

This publication is a product of the United State Forest Service and may be accessed online at http://www.na.fs.fed.us/fire_poster/prop_at-risk.htm.