



UI Extension Forestry Information Series

Fire No. 16

Wildfire - Not "If?", But "When"

Yvonne Barkley

If you live in Idaho, you live in a fire-based ecosystem. These are ecosystems that were born and raised by wildfires. Anticipating and planning for wildfires is the first step to making your home and property as fire-safe as possible.



A firewise home is a non-combustible home

Preventative measures should start with your home. New research has shown that up to 85% of wildfire home ignitions are from flaming brands and embers that can fly in from as far away as 5 miles from the flaming front of a wildfire. This makes your home the largest and most vulnerable source of ignition on your property.

Inexpensive things you can do now to increase your home fire-resistiveness:

- Remove all debris from gutters, overhangs, room additions, and bay windows. Pay attention to areas such as corners and under stairs, as well as under decks, porches, carports, and around fences.
- Box eaves, fascias, soffits, and vents or enclose with metal screens. Screen vent openings to prevent firebrands or other flammable objects larger than 1/8" from entering your home.
- Install spark arresters on your chimneys.
- Reconsider your outdoor furniture and accessories - many of these items are common sources of ignition. Replace wood or wicker tables and chairs with ones made from metal and glass.
- Cushions, umbrellas, furniture covers, door mats, planters and window boxes, as well as boats, campers, and other recreational equipment are all places where embers can collect, smolder, and ignite well after the fire has passed. Have an enclosed space to store these items or be able to move them away from your home in the event of a blaze.
- Identify areas where combustible materials meet, for example, where a wooden fence is attached to wooden stairs that leads to a wooden deck. Separate these areas with a span of non-flammable material.

Long-term retrofitting activities include:

- Roofing materials have flammability ratings - they go from Class A, (able to withstand severe exposure to fire, like metal roofs) to Class C (able to withstand light exposure to fire, like asphalt shingles). Wood shake roofs are not rated and in many cases, offer almost certain ignition of your home.
- Use of fire-resistant exteriors, such as cement, plaster, stucco, brick, and masonry, provides

greater levels of protection to your home than vinyl siding.

- Use of double-paned or tempered glass can help reduce the risk of interior ignitions from heating by providing an added layer of protection.
- Screens should have metal frames as well as metal, not plastic, mesh.

Treat your landscape

Fire and land management agencies cannot help prevent wildfire disasters without homeowner participation. If you live in the wildland/urban interface (WUI), recognize that your home and immediate surroundings belongs to you. This means that you, as the homeowner, have the primary responsibility for reducing your home's vulnerability.



Surrounding yourself with a lush, beautiful, and well-maintained landscape is your best defense against losses from wildfires. Starting at the house and concentrating your efforts in a 30-foot radius, begin by:

- Removing flammable debris by pruning, raking, mowing and removing.
- Maintaining your irrigation system and keeping lawns and plant materials well watered and trimmed.
- Pruning dead branches out of trees and remove lower branches to a height of six to 15 feet.
- Storing recreational vehicles and equipment, such as boats and canoes, away from in the home in an enclosed space.
- Creating two ways to access your property - both

for fire equipment access and escape routes.

- Marking roads and property entrances clearly with non-flammable signs.

Evacuation

DO NOT WAIT TO BE TOLD TO EVACUATE. Sixty percent of lives lost to wildland fire are of those that chose to stay and wait and see, and then evacuated too late.



First, ready yourself and your family for emergency evacuation:

- Gather all persons in the household together and let everyone know you are getting ready to evacuate.
- Have everyone dress for safety. Put on socks, closed-toed leather shoes or boots, long pants, and a long-sleeved shirt. Grab a pair of leather gloves, a bandanna, and a hat as well.
- Park vehicles in the direction you will escape. Leave keys in the ignition.
- Pack emergency kits containing clothing, food, water, and valuables in your vehicle.
- Put pets in pet carriers and in a safe, accessible place, ready to load into your vehicles when you leave.
- Load horses or other livestock that will need to be evacuated.
- Check with neighbors to see if they need assistance.
- Notify others when you are leaving and where you plan to go.

Then, ONLY if there is time:

- Look around for flammable materials lying around or against your home and move them to a safe place. Items include things like patio furniture and cushions, door mats, window boxes and planters, wicker baskets, pine cones and dried flower arrangements, newspapers, garbage cans without lids, BBQ propane tanks, and brooms.
- Shut off the gas supply.
- Turn on all indoor and outdoor lights to make your house easier for firefighters to find in the dark.
- Close windows, doors, curtains and blinds.
- Cover attic and basement vents.
- Get the emergency generator ready to run any pumps.
- Place a ladder to the roof opposite the approaching fire and put a sprinkler on the roof. Wet down decks, flammable siding, and lawns.
- Using aluminum foil or metal flashing, cover areas where combustible materials meet each other. Think of where snow gathers and drifts in the winter – windowsills, where the house meets the deck, corners, etc. This is also where firebrands and embers can gather and start a blaze.

Resources

Here are some web sites to go to for more in-depth information:

- University of Idaho Extension Forestry - <http://www.uidaho.edu/extension/forestry/fire>
- Idaho Firewise – <http://www.idahofirewise.org>
- eXtension Wildfire Information Network - http://www.extension.org/surviving_wildfire

About the Author: Yvonne Barkley is an Associate Extension Specialist - Forestry at the University of Idaho Moscow, ID.

