

Ventura County Star

URL: http://www.venturacountystar.com/vcs/county_news/article/0,1375,VCS_226_3162578,00.html

Software lets users assess fire vulnerability

Homeowners can learn how to keep back yard safe

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September 5, 2004

Proper landscaping is one of the best ways to protect a home from wildfires, fire experts say.

So the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service is providing a free service called FireWise designed to show homeowners how to keep their back yards beautiful and safe.

The software, now available at the service's Web site at <http://www.ecosmart.gov>, is an interactive program that lets homeowners plot their property's landscaping on a grid and see whether it is vulnerable to wildfires.

Residents should use the program as a guide in addition to consulting a fire safety expert, Forest Service officials said.

Wildfire season has arrived, and FireWise could prove especially useful for residents in fire-prone areas of Ventura County.

Massive wildfires last year charred more than 170,000 acres in Simi Valley, Moorpark and Piru.

Thirty-eight homes were lost, and the disaster cost \$11.3 million to fight and caused \$17.1 million worth of damage.

Diane Kellegrew's home on a cul-de-sac in the northern part of Simi Valley was right at the edge of the blaze.

Fortunately, her home wasn't touched by the flames; instead, ash covered much of her back yard.

Kellegrew said she and her husband plan to redo the landscaping around the house and possibly get rid of some oil-rich eucalyptus trees.

She said what saved her property was the greenbelt in the yard that acted as a break. She likes the idea of fire safety software.

"I think it's a great idea," she said. "I was actually trying to find information on fire-retardant plants, but I couldn't find any."

Another Simi Valley resident, Claudio Ostrovsky, also said the fire came within a few yards of his home.

But luckily, it didn't burn past the line of green plants along the edge of his back yard. Ostrovsky also thinks the software is a good idea, but because he's not very computer savvy, he might not use it, he said.

"I wouldn't, but my wife probably would," he said. "She's more prepared."

Still limited

The first version of FireWise is still limited, and the Forest Service is working on a second version due out next year.

Officials suggest using it in tandem with the Forest Service's water and energy conservation software, WaterWise and EnergyWise.

FireWise lets a user plot the exact dimensions and location of his or her home on a grid, along with the number of trees, grassy areas and shrubs on the property.

A pull-down menu lets the user plot the type of trees and their height and age. A safety bar next to the grid will change colors, depending on whether the home is at risk of fire. Green means low risk, yellow means medium and red means high.

More interactive features will be added in the next version, including types of shrubs and roofing material.

"People can get a really good idea from the movement of trees on the site as to how safe their property will really be from wildfire," Forest Service spokesman Jim Geiger said. "Once they figure it's not too fire safe, we can give them an idea as to how to remove trees and move branches off the ground."

Greg McPherson, director of the Forest Service Center for Urban Forest Research, which developed FireWise, said the idea came about when

surveys showed property owners weren't heeding warnings to cut back brush.

"We noticed that even though there are laws that require people to create a defensive space around their homes, it's not always happening, or it's happening infrequently," said McPherson, who has a doctorate in forestry.

The point was to make an interactive program that could motivate people to think about safety as well as decoration.

"Our thinking was, this is something our mothers should be able to use," McPherson said.

People still should consult a fire safety expert when landscaping, since wind patterns, weather, construction materials and other factors can determine how a fire will behave.

'A real eye-opener'

Simi Valley resident Jay Galbo said being so close to the fire last year really concerned him, but his neighborhood ended up not having any problems.

Galbo recently put new landscaping around his home himself. He said he would've used FireWise had he known about it.

He also said he believes the software will be a benefit for people moving into the developments being built near his neighborhood.

"(The fire) was a real eye-opener for everyone up here," he said.

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