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Written By: Jackie Denk,
Fire Information Officer
928-635-5607

Prepare for Wildland Fire Now; Tomorrow May Be Too Late

When the crisis is upon you, the time for preparation is through. That was the theme at a Forest Service conference I recently attended. The goal of the conference was to get each of us to think ahead, plan for the unexpected and do everything we can now to be prepared for the future.

As far as I can tell, there is no greater application of that principle than ensuring that each of us does everything possible now to protect our lives, homes and communities from future wildland fires.

And that future may prove to be this month or next given the current drought conditions in our area. This has been the driest cold season in more than a century. According to the National Weather Service, northern Arizona received only 27 percent of its normal precipitation between Sept. 1, 2001, and March 31. Between Jan. 1 and March 31, the area received a scant 10 percent of normal precipitation.

The problem runs even deeper than the meager precipitation this winter. Six of the last seven years in this area have brought below-average precipitation. Our forest has essentially been drying out year after year. Including the current precipitation deficit for 2002, our area is almost 42 inches behind on precipitation since 1995.

This year those drought conditions have propelled us into an early and potentially extreme fire season. Fire managers with the Forest Service estimate that we are seeing conditions more like mid-to-late May than early April. Our neighbors to the east have already experienced what that can mean. Twenty-nine homes and 15 structures were recently lost to wildland fire in New Mexico.

So the question then is really not if but when we will be faced with a catastrophic wildland fire that will threaten our homes. That seems painfully clear. What is not so clear to me is why people choose to wait for the crisis before considering preparation.

Two researchers from the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, Ed Smith and Marlene Rebori, pondered that same question in the paper “Factors Affecting Property Owner Decisions About Defensible Space.” In the paper, the authors propose that despite considerable effort by land management and fire prevention agencies, people living in high-fire-hazard areas – like ours – have been slow to adopt defensible space practices.

After reviewing several surveys involving property owners living in high-fire-hazard areas of California and Nevada and taking into consideration their own experiences, the authors reported 15 factors that influenced people’s decisions about adopting defensible space practices.

While it is not necessary to delve into all 15 factors here, I would like to touch on several that I believe affect the attitudes and actions of northern Arizona residents.

First, the authors reported that some property owners thought it useless to implement defensible space practices. The “futility” factor was espoused by people who did not believe, despite evidence to the contrary, that implementing defensible space practices would protect their homes from wildland fire. Unfortunately, I have heard comments like that. I urge those of you who consider defensible space techniques futile to rethink your

position. Consider whether or not you are willing to stake your home and all your belongings on that belief because that is what you are wagering.

A second factor the authors found amongst some property owners was “irresponsibility.” These are individuals who believe the fire departments, Forest Service and the government in general are responsible for reducing the threat of wildland fire. Basically, they believe it is everyone’s responsibility but their own. While federal, state and local fire fighters do bravely take on the responsibility of battling blazes, they simply cannot do it alone. Each of us has the responsibility to make our own property defensible. If we do not, it will be on our own conscience, not theirs, if our home goes up in flames.

Another factor the researchers found related to property owners who felt that removing trees or changing the landscape in any way was “unnatural.” They believed they should leave their property as they found it. I think many of our neighbors may feel this way. I can understand why. We are blessed to live in a beautiful wildland area. However, the current state of our forest is not truly natural. Man has changed the landscape to meet his needs by suppressing natural fire, which has resulted in the overly dense conditions of today’s forest.

Another related concern had to do with “aesthetics and function.” Some people I’ve spoken with are concerned that defensible space techniques will make their property look like a moonscape. As Smith and Rebori pointed out, some property owners believe that “landscape functions or uses, such as privacy hedges, shade trees, and windbreaks, would not be compatible with defensible space concepts.” This is not the case. Implementing defensible space can actually mean adding plants to your yard in some cases – as long as they are a more fire-resistant species. Also, as far as attractiveness is concerned, most people

would pick a big, healthy yellow pine over a shorter, thinner blackjack pine in their yards any day. You won't get big yellows if your trees are crowding each other.

The "cost" factor dissuaded some people from defensible space concepts. These people felt that the costs – in terms of both time and money – were too great to make the work worthwhile. In other words, the costs outweighed the benefits. If this describes you, I suggest you consider the costs – in terms of money, time and emotional and physical health – of losing your home to a wildland fire. I also recommend that you speak with your local fire department or the Arizona State Land Department. They can direct you to programs designed to help private property owners treat their land. For example, the Sherwood Forest/Parks Fuels Reduction Program has treated about 50 acres of private property already and will continue that work on about 300 acres this spring.

In the surveys, some property owners said they simply did not know how to implement defensible space practices. The "unknowledgeable" factor is any easy one to deal with. Call your local fire department, the Forest Service, the Arizona State Land Department or any one of a number of land management and fire prevention agencies. Any of us would be happy to talk with you about defensible space, recommend actions for your property and send you useful information to get you started.

Finally, another issue I have noticed in our local area has been the "disposal" factor. Some people feel that they do not have an easy way to get rid of the debris left following implementation of defensible space techniques. Here again, though, I think there are some options that people may not have considered. First of all, the Kaibab National Forest made Moonset Pit, located near the Parks community, available last summer and will again this summer for slash disposal. Also, your local fire departments can often help you or recommend appropriate ways to get rid of debris. Finally, there is a lot of knowledge

amongst your neighbors. I have had the opportunity to get to know several people who have done amazing work on their own property. These individuals generally want to help their neighbors complete the same kind of work.

While each of these factors may not relate directly to you, you can probably recognize some of these attitudes in your family, friends and neighbors. Recognizing these roadblocks is truly the first step toward removing them.

Remember, the time to prepare yourself and your property for a wildland fire is today. When the crisis hits, it will be too late.

Will you be ready?