

Fire Smart

Information Provided by Gerry Bates

Throughout Idaho it is more and more common to see homes and other types of structures being built in wildland environments. This trend is creating an expansion of wildland/urban interface areas. Wildland/urban interface areas exist whenever homes are nestled among trees and other combustible vegetation. These areas are increasing in number for very simple reasons: usually they offer such benefits as scenic beauty, economy, and escape from the pressures of city life styles. These advantages of interface living have triggered a significant population shift from urban living to living among the forests and wildlands.

Fires in the wildland/urban interface are unique. They challenge both structural and wildland fire fighters, who are trained and equipped differently. Wildland fire fighters have a responsibility to protect the wildlands and the natural resources within them. They establish a defensible perimeter in front of the fire, clearing out all fuel along the line of the perimeter. When the fire advances as far as the cleared line, the flames become starved of fuel. Municipal fire fighters traditionally control fires using hoses and water from established fire mains and hydrants. As structural fire fighters in a densely built up city, they depend on rapid response to catch the fire while it is still relatively small, so that less water will be needed. No single agency is adequately prepared for both types of fire fighting.

An aerial view of an interface area will demonstrate another problem. A glance out the airplane window might show a large expanse of forest. But possibly, that scene might include the edge of a national forest or state park, numerous private homes, commercial areas, etc. The problem is that wildfires do not respect political boundaries of community, land management, property owners, or fire districts. If a fire began to spread across this expanse, separate lines of jurisdiction that exist on a map would not affect it. Attacking the fire would clearly need to be a joint effort of all of the affected jurisdictions.

The past 100 years of wildland fire suppression has created more vegetation for fuel. When fires occur in the wildland/urban interface, we put them out to prevent the destruction of homes. This creates a problem because forests have historically depended on fires to maintain good health. Fire is a natural occurrence and helps the health of the forest by thinning trees and brush, and eliminating dead material. By suppressing fires to protect our homes and population, we have interfered with this natural process. Since natural fires are now infrequent, vegetation density has increased, which provides more fuel for fires. When fires do occur, the denser vegetation burns with more intensity, and the fire is more destructive and dangerous.

There are many actions that can be taken to reduce the potential of fire in existing housing developments as well as planned new developments. No community is safe from wildfire, but we can be wise about our community design and use of prescribed fire in the state. We can reduce the staggering impact and costs of severe wildland fire. Firefighters recognize three components of the fire environment: Fuel, Weather and Topography. These three components determine how a wildfire will behave. Fuel is the only component that both firefighters and the public can change. Together, fuels, weather, and topography define the fire environment, and help to determine the ease at which it will burn, and the time in which it can be controlled.

There are steps you can take to help reduce the risk of wildfire damage to your home or property.

- 1) **Define defensible space** by creating a buffer zone at least 30 feet around existing structures. It will reduce the intensity and risk of a wildfire from starting or spreading. Defensible space not only helps to protect structures in the critical minutes that it takes a fire to pass, it also gives firefighters an area to work in. In a large fire, firefighters must focus on the structures they can safely defend. A building with defensible space offers the opportunity to prevent fire, allowing firefighters a chance to save it.
- 2) **Reduce flammable vegetation**, trees and brush. Remove or thin brush beyond the defensible perimeter. Material removed from property should be disposed of by chipping, pile burning, or transporting to dump sites. Livestock is also a good way to remove flammable vegetation. Larger properties may require heavy equipment to bulldoze brush and other vegetation.
- 3) **Remove or prune trees**. In wooded areas, reduce the density of the surrounding forest by removing or thinning overcrowded trees. Be sure to prune low hanging branches to keep a ground fire from climbing into upper branches. "Limbing up" cuts the chances of ground fires climbing into tree canopies and becoming unpredictable flame-throwers.
- 4) **Cut grass and weeds** regularly. Fire spreads rapidly in dry grass and weeds. Mow grasses and other low vegetation and keep them well watered, especially during periods of high fire danger.
- 5) **Relocate woodpiles**. Stack all wood materials at least 30 feet from any structure. Then clear away flammable vegetation within 10 feet of woodpiles as an additional safeguard against the spread of fire.
- 6) **Keep your property clean**. Clear pine needles, leaves, and debris from your roof gutters and yard to eliminate an ignition source. Remove dead limbs and branches within ten feet of a chimney or deck.
- 7) **Road signs and address numbers** that are easy to read from the road allow firefighters to find your property quickly during an emergency.
- 8) **Safe, easy access** to your property includes two lane roads that are wide enough to accommodate emergency vehicles. Bridges need to support the weight of heavy equipment. Driveways should not have overhanging

- trees or peripheral vegetation to allow emergency equipment to reach your house.
- 9) **Your roof** is the most vulnerable part of your house in a wildfire. If you have a wood shake roof, replace it with a noncombustible material. If you have a fireplace or woodstove, make sure it has an approved spark arrestor.
 - 10) **Monitor your local radio** and television stations for fire reports and evacuation procedures. Keep an emergency checklist handy, and be prepared to evacuate if your neighborhood is threatened. Don't wait until the last minute to make preparations in case of emergency. Arrange garden hoses so they can reach all areas around your properties, and pack the car for a quick departure.

A major wildfire can be an overwhelming event to experience. Wildfire is a natural part of our environment that we can either fear or respect. We absolutely should not choose to ignore it. Property owners need to take personal responsibility for their own homes. Don't wait until the fire is coming and hope the fire department can save your home. If we make adjustments and modifications to our homes and the sites they occupy, then we can live confidently with it. The actions property owners take by building appropriate structures and properly caring for their interface environment can significantly reduce the fire hazard.