

# Hot, dry summer predicted: Will you be ready?

BY SANDY SHAFFER

The weather forecasters and wildfire experts are predicting a hot dry summer for southwestern Oregon; their only question is how much lightning we might get. So how does a private landowner go about getting as ready as possible for fire season? By taking it in steps, that's how.

My hubby and I did our initial "defensible space" thinning and pruning over a decade ago, so we're now in the "maintenance" mode. Still, we've found that there's so much to do to maintain our rural property/home that it's crazy to try and do it all in the spring. We break our fire season prep into three categories: "big fuels," "fine fuels," and "homesite habitat." *Each is very important to address* so that your home is safer during a fire, and each has a different time line that keeps us busy almost all year long.

**Big fuels.** This is thinning and pruning up trees in our defensible space and along our driveway. Because we're on a hill, we also evaluate the trees on our 20 acres annually to maintain an open canopy that might help slow a fire's progression. *This work is done in the fall and winter months.* This also includes cutting, splitting and stacking firewood for the following winter, as well as moving unused firewood to at least 30 feet away from the house each spring. Don't wait til summer – it's too much work then!

**Fine fuels.** Perhaps *the* most important to mitigate before fire season! By fine fuels I'm talking grass, weeds, leaves, pine needles and any (fire-resistant) shrubs or flowers that we've planted; *this work is done during the spring to early summer.* This takes the most time for us because our defensible space is big (200-plus feet out from the house) and our driveway is long. Also, we have a lot of oak, pine and madrone trees.

Landscape plantings are cleaned out,

pruned and thinned in the springtime. We also clean the gutters and roof in the spring.

We don't start raking and burning leaves/needles until spring because I like to keep some ground cover on our hillside during the rainy season. We rake around the house, garage and out-buildings, under the deck, around a greenhouse, a travel trailer, the large propane tank and the power transformer, and all around our above-ground pool. We also rake along the circular driveway.

However, we also have to rake during fire season! We have two madrone trees and a large pine near the house: the madrone drop their leaves in July, while the pine drops its needles in August. Both produce too much litter to ignore through the summer.

Trying to time your mowing and/or weed-whacking to just once each spring is a roll of the dice; we put these tasks off until May, to see how conditions are progressing. We mow or weed-whack around the house, outbuildings and along the driveway, and also mow to maintain some fuel breaks/roads on the property, which could help slow a ground fire.

This brings me to something I learned at a fire conference in Reno this March. In the past I've written about observing where leaves and pine needles collect due to wind patterns around your house, because these are the same spots where embers would collect during a fire. This includes places like along the foundation where the siding is a bit irregular, interior corners, porches, valleys on the roof.

In Reno the buzz was about Colorado's 2012 Waldo Canyon fire (346 homes lost), where a home built with a stucco exterior insulation-finishing system (*see photo, top right*) was almost destroyed. Notice the gap from the edge of the stucco to the driveway (*see photo, middle right*); it allows

for drainage of the system. During the fire, embers collected in the gap, allowing ignition of the insulation layer and then the wood framing (*see photo, bottom right*). Fortunately, firefighters caught this in time. My point here is that every house has its weak points, so identify yours and know how to mitigate them during a fire.

**Homesite habitat.** Here I'm talking about our home's ignition zone (HIZ): the house and everything connected to it by a *continuous line of fuel* (for more info on the HIZ go to [www.RVFP.com](http://www.RVFP.com)). It includes your home's construction features, vegetation, and personal things around the home that are flammable. Remember: *over 90% of homes that burn in wildfires burn due to embers landing on or near the home.* By removing flammable items from around the home if a fire is approaching, we greatly increase the chance that our home will survive.

*The timing for addressing this varies:* moving outdoor furniture pads into the garage would be when a wildfire is approaching, while construction such as replacing a shake roof or installing double-paned windows can be done any time.

I've heard of homes burning due to a fiber door mat outside a wooden door, plants underneath a window, a wooden fence, wood mulch, a rag mop leaning up against the house, patio furniture, and firewood under the deck.

So ask yourself: what types of flammable things that I keep/use near the house could catch embers and end up igniting the home? What about cans of paint or small propane tanks? They're more flammable than the large ones. Learn how to safely disengage the barbecue's propane to quickly store it in the garage.

Regarding this burning ember issue – think it through *beforehand*. Inventory your home and your homesite for weak



A nice, neat, safe, stucco house.



The insulation system needs an allowance for drainage.



Interior ignition as shown here can be difficult for firefighters to spot during a wildfire. Above photos provided by Insurance Institute for Business & Home Safety.

points and last minute cleanup items. Have a checklist of to-dos. With a fire approaching, what would you need to put into the house or garage? All of this should be an integral part of your family's emergency evacuation plan—which you review each year, right? So that *your* family will be ready for fire season!

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## Change is coming for the Applegate Fire Plan

The collaboratively developed Applegate Fire Plan (AFP) is a community wildfire protection plan (CWPP) that was written in 2001-2002 with 28 partners involved. The Applegate Fire Plan is watershed-based, covering all lands within parts of three counties and two states. Much has been accomplished in the Applegate over the past 11 years, but given that both Jackson and Josephine Counties (which represent 88% of the total Applegate watershed) now have active CWPPs, the need for a separate community wildfire protection plan seems redundant.

Therefore, with the 2012 updates of both the Josephine and the Jackson County CWPPs (which will be completed early this summer), the Applegate Fire Plan will become incorporated into these two countywide CWPPs, in order to more effectively combine resources and also to adopt the County Risk/Hazard assessments.

As the AFP coordinator for the past decade, I participated in the development of both county CWPPs in 2004-2006. I have participated in both the Fuels and Risk and the Outreach and Education committees for these CWPPs over the years,

providing timely and continuous input, as well as reporting on the Applegate's status to the county CWPPs. I have consulted with and reported back to the Applegate community and our Applegate Valley Rural Fire District via several media, constantly keeping everyone updated and informed. I've also helped the fire district obtain numerous grants for fuel reduction work. This has been a huge time commitment for me over the years.

I will continue to participate in the county CWPP committees as a private landowner, and encourage any interested Applegaters to do the same.

The original 2002 Applegate Communities Collaborative Fire Protection

Strategy (*Balancing Act: Living with Fire in the Applegate*) is a good reference resource on the watershed, and it will continue to be available to interested parties and new residents in notebook form (see my contact information below—we have plenty available!).

The full original AFP document and maps can be found electronically at <https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/handle/1794/2691>. The fire plans and updates on the county CWPPs can be found at [www.co.jackson.or.us/fireplan](http://www.co.jackson.or.us/fireplan) or [www.jocosherriff.us/your-sheriffs-office/emergency-management/fire-plan](http://www.jocosherriff.us/your-sheriffs-office/emergency-management/fire-plan).

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