

Situational awareness: Everyone needs to have it!

BY SANDY SHAFFER

We've heard the term "situational awareness" before. It's often applied to law enforcement, firefighters, pilots, the military, and maybe even golfers. Sadly, in recent years it has also become applicable for folks in a shopping mall, school principals, moviegoers, and marathon runners. Being aware of what's going on around you could save your life.

According to Wikipedia, situational awareness is "the perception of environmental elements with respect to time and/or space, the comprehension of their meaning, and the projection of their status after some variable has changed, such as time." Be aware of the forecasted weather, the condition of natural elements around you, the time of day, and how they all might affect your activities or plans.

So why am I bringing this up? Because it's looking like this year's fire season here in southwestern Oregon (and most of the West) could be even more severe than last year. As I write this in late April, fuels of all sizes in our forests are almost drought-dry, and the snowpack is far below normal for the date, which will probably mean less water for irrigation and firefighting.

As private citizens residing in the wildland-urban interface, we should be taking this into account as we prepare our properties for fire season. Fine fuels (weeds, grass, litter) and ladder fuels (vegetation of varying heights that could lead a ground

fire into tree canopies) will *definitely* need diligent attention before summer gets here. And, don't forget to clean up your "home ignition zone" to help protect your house from flying embers.

Of equal importance is preparing your family for fire season—both beforehand and during the summer months. Do you have a family evacuation plan? Does it include your pets, animals and livestock? Have you reviewed and practiced this plan? If not, why not? Let me share a story with you—it might convince you to take action.

I attended a wildfire conference in March. One of the main sessions was on Colorado's Black Forest Fire in June 2013. The Black Forest area in Colorado Springs is a thickly wooded pine forest with lots of homes on long, narrow driveways. The fire was fairly small at 14,280 acres, but it destroyed 486 homes in just hours. There were two deaths, but it could have been much worse.

That Black Forest fire was preceded by six consecutive days of a Red Flag Warning for the area. (Red Flag Warnings are issued by local offices of the National Weather Service when conditions in that area are conducive to the formation of wildfires. Ingredients considered are winds, low humidity, high temperatures, and the dryness of vegetation in the area. Thunderstorms up the ante even more.)

So, last June on the *seventh* Red

Flag day, Black Forest residents went about their normal business even though severe weather (50 mph winds) was in the forecast. During the conference session we were told that residents even left kids at home alone while they drove to town to do a couple of errands. And guess what? A forest fire *did* start, and it spread quickly.

Can you just imagine the fear of trying to get back into your burning neighborhood, driving up your long forested road to get to your children, while firefighters tell you to stay out?

Here in southwestern Oregon we are no strangers to this type of situation—we have Red Flag days, lightning storms and wildfires. If we're in a drought, we've got a Red Flag warning and our local fire folks are gearing up—shouldn't *we* also pay attention to this high-danger situation and

take action accordingly?

Learn weather patterns in your area (common wind and lightning storm patterns), and pay attention to local forecasts and warnings, especially during fire season. *Have situational awareness!*

Write or review your family evacuation plan each year before fire season begins. Make sure everyone understands and agrees to follow that plan! Get prepared, so that we all can have a safe fire season!

For more information on any of these topics—defensible space, evacuation planning, home ignition zone, wildfire preparedness, etc.—go to the links listed below, or stop in at Applegate Valley Fire District headquarters at 1095 Upper Applegate Road in Jacksonville (Ruch).

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— FOR MORE INFORMATION —

www.RVFPC.com

Fire season regulations, fuels maintenance, defensible space, fire-resistant plants, fire-safe building materials, ember awareness, family and animal evacuations.

www.applegatefd.com

Local fire conditions, our fire district, home ignition zone.

www.swofire.com

Up-to-date local fire conditions, wildfires, important notices.

www.firewise.org

Defensible space, fire-resistant plants, home ignition zone, neighborhood organizing.

www.wildlandfirersg.org

Ready-Set-Go! program, family evacuation planning and tips.

www.NFPA.org

Emergency preparedness, building fire codes and standards.

**You can also inquire at
Applegate Valley Fire District headquarters.**

FIRE SEASON

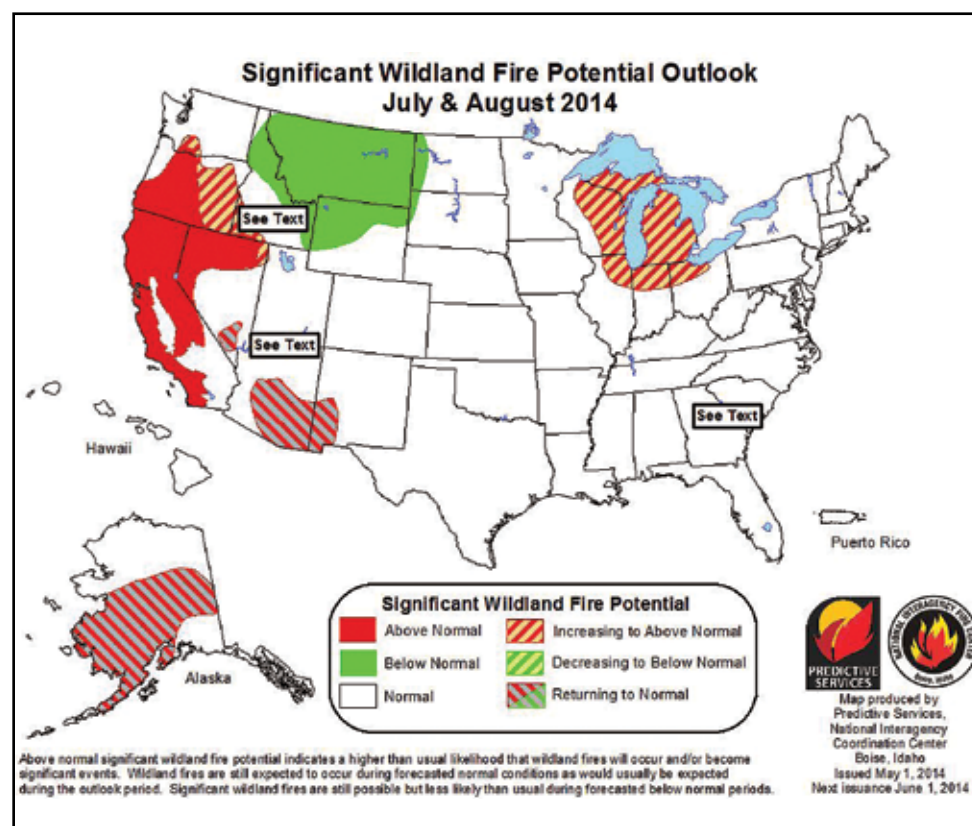
lush pastures and meadows cure in late spring, then become dry fuel in summer. Decades of fire exclusion, intensive management and various aged fire-scars have produced a very complex wildland fuel profile. Our area displays a highly variable complex patchwork mosaic, which includes forestland and extensive wildland interface fuels. Large areas within southwest Oregon display high surface-fuel loading, low crown-base height, over-dense stands, and closed canopy. Under severe summer conditions, widespread high-intensity fires may occur—remember last summer?

Fuel condition indications

Current fuel conditions indicate that larger fuels have not received sufficient moisture in their cores (while the quick-drying rinds may appear wet). Typically, it is the smaller surface fuels that determine a

fire's rate of spread and flame length, while larger fuels contribute to higher intensity and soil burn severity. Because large-diameter fuels in our area have already dried to low summer levels due to the drought, those larger fuels may contribute to harsher, longer-lasting fires.

Typically, fire season begins in the lowlands as warming and drying occurs, and then expands to include the mid-slopes and northern aspects as summer progresses. In most years the higher ridges and mountains retain snow until late in the season, providing a graduated fire season. But not this year—all elevations and aspects may be vulnerable for a longer period of time. Our summer lightning storms or careless fires may find receptive fuels over a larger area, creating complex situations for residents, federal neighbors, and fire managers.



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By all indications, the 2014 fire season has all the ingredients to provide challenges across southwest Oregon. Fire season may start earlier, last longer, and be more severe than average. Areas that have not recently experienced an active wildfire season may see fires this season. This year

our period and area of vulnerability to fire *should not* come as a surprise to any of us.

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Calling your fire department—or not

You are at your home and suddenly you smell smoke and hear sirens from your local fire department. You look around and see a column of smoke in the distance and wonder where it is and what's on fire.

Everyone should be concerned when it comes to fire. We live in a beautiful area where the largest threat is wildfire. It's important during emergency situations to know what to do and whom to contact.

In our tight-knit community of the Applegate Valley, it always seems more convenient to call your local fire station to report a fire or get some information about a fire. And a large majority of people in the Applegate and Williams communities know someone who is affiliated with our local fire departments and we have a comfort level knowing we can call on them. That's a good thing!

However, the best and quickest way to report information about a fire or other emergency near you is to call 9-1-1. Give the 9-1-1 operator your location, detailed information about what you observe, and your contact information in case they need to call you back. The 9-1-1 folks will immediately contact our fire district's closest personnel, as well as other resources, such as an ambulance, the law, etc. During an emergency situation is *not* the best time to call the fire station because most fire department personnel are busy addressing the emergency!

If you need information about a fire in the area, there are several options for you. Developing a community phone-tree system is an effective tool for emergency communications. You can also stop by the fire district office for more information, retrieve information through your local media, and visit these websites: Applegatefd.com, SWOFIRE.com and Williamsfirerescue.com.

Thank you for all your support, and have a safe summer.

And remember—call 9-1-1 in an emergency.

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HAVE A HAPPY AND SAFE FOURTH OF JULY!