

# Are you prepared for a firestorm?

BY TOM CARSTENS

“Hey, Chief, fire’s all around us and I need you to round up my livestock and get them to safety!”

Believe it or not, calls like this happen. But when wildfire hits a neighborhood, you can bet the fire chief is too busy to round up your cattle. Besides, it’s your job to get your animals to safety. By the time wildfire threatens, your livestock should already be evacuated—and you shouldn’t even be home!

Would we be prepared if we were hit with something like the Camp Fire in Paradise, California? That fire, with 50-foot flames, spread at the pace of a football field a second and destroyed a whole town and 85 lives. Could that happen here?

Probably not exactly, because our conditions are not the same. Even though we live in an area with high burn risk (see the map on page 16), we rarely experience the high wind velocities of the Feather River canyon. Our air is never that dry. Air mass conditions in southern Oregon are different, as is population density. (Paradise is characterized by small, tightly packed residential lots.)

What we do have in common is a steep topography, which can cause erratic fire behavior; lots of same-way-in, same-way-out access to our properties; and plenty of the two fire starters, lightning and people.

Although fire preparedness would not have stopped the rapid house-to-house spread of the fire, which caused many deaths in Paradise, it might have prevented other deaths—those due to limited evacuation routes or to people not evacuating at all or too late.

To help us understand what Applegaters need to do to prepare for catastrophic wildfire, we contacted Jackson and Josephine counties’ Emergency Management offices and the Applegate Valley Fire District, who gave us the following information.

## The bottom line up front

We don’t have to experience a catastrophe like Paradise here. It’s all about understanding our evacuation system, being prepared for the inevitable call to go, and keeping a watchful eye on the weather and ongoing fires.

How does emergency evacuation work in the Applegate Valley?

There are three evacuation levels: Ready (Level 1), Set (Level 2), Go (Level 3). County sheriff’s offices set these levels, in coordination with the entire fire emergency leadership in the Rogue Valley, by calculating the risks for specific geographic areas. For more information about evacuation levels, see the sidebar.

## Citizen Alert

Alerts are made in the press, on broadcast media, and on social media. You can also get alerts on your phone about emergencies and other important community news by signing up for Citizen Alert. If you have a landline at your home or business, you are automatically in the database and will be called when evacuation notices go out. If you have a cell phone or other device, go to [rvem.org](http://rvem.org) to register. (See the “Register for Citizen Alert” sidebar for instructions.)

If you don’t register, the sheriff will have to send out a volunteer search-and-rescue team to knock on your door

if wildfire threatens. This is inherently unsafe for these folks because they are not equipped like firefighters. And they might contribute to more traffic congestion. They will not try to get through a locked gate (although they will post a note on the gate). This is not a good system to rely on because, in chaotic conditions, everyone gets really busy. And if you wait for the firefighters to come to the rescue, guess what? That’s time taken away from fighting the fire.

Remember: The sheriff and his team are not there to help you pack your stuff. They’re there to get you out... now. Often there’s so little time that the deputy will just load you up in his vehicle and go. You’ve basically waited too long.

So please make sure every household member registers for the Citizen Alert system (see below).

This is not only a massive interagency cooperative effort, but a collaborative effort that involves all of us. We need to be prepared! We must take personal responsibility for the safety of our families and our animals. If we don’t, we’re going to be part of the problem when catastrophic fire hits.

If you’d like to learn more, the Jacksonville Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) has been making well-received presentations. Two more are scheduled at the Jacksonville Library: Tuesday, March 5, from 6 - 8 pm and Saturday, March 16, from 10 am - noon.

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## Register for Citizen Alert

To register your cell phone:

1. Access [rvem.org](http://rvem.org), the website for the Rogue Valley emergency management system.
2. Click on the “Citizen Alert” at the lower right of your screen and follow the instructions. A short video will take you through the six-step registration process.
3. Every member of your household who has a cell phone should individually register. That way, even if you’re at different locations, everyone will get the notifications.
4. If you don’t use the internet or if you have questions, call your county’s Emergency Management office: Jackson County, 541-774-6035; Josephine County, 541-474-5300.



Evacuation of Paradise, California, due to the devastating Camp Fire. Reprinted with permission from the Chico Enterprise-Record.

## Ready, Set, Go!

### Ready (Level 1): Prepare your home

By the start of fire season, you should have this checklist complete.

- Make an evacuation plan and go over it with the entire household. Make sure everyone understands what they’re supposed to do.
- Designate a meeting place. It’s possible that you may not all be home at the time the evacuation notices go out. You could plan to get together at a friend’s house or at an evacuation shelter. In any case, your meeting place should probably be well away from your immediate neighborhood. If Red Cross shelters are available, you’ll receive directions through agency Public Information Officers and the media.
- Think about where to corral your livestock. Plan to get it done early; it’ll take some time. Think of your animals as you would your kids; a plan to just release them is cruel and will make the congestion in the area worse. Josephine County requests that you not plan on using the fairgrounds in Grants Pass. These grounds may be required for equipment staging areas for firefighting crews and for emergency shelters.
- Don’t assume that the routes you normally use will be available. The wildfire might block access. Traffic can get clogged up. Scout your neighborhood for alternative routes, even if they might be dirt roads (but make sure they do not have locked gates). Depending on conditions, they could lead you to safety. Do your own due diligence and have a Plan B.
- Search your neighborhood for possible safe zones in case all your evacuation routes are blocked. These would be large open areas free of dry grass and other vegetation. It might even be an area that has already burned. A typical engine crew will look for an 80-square-foot area when flame lengths are ten feet. For longer flames, much larger areas will be required. If you know of a possible safe zone, but it’s normally behind a locked gate, it might be prudent to discuss with the owner how you could access the property during fire season. It could make the difference between life and death.
- Have a “Go Kit” packed and ready. Include family supplies, important documents, contact lists, household inventory (for insurance claims), family photos, and valuables. For stuff you will need but can’t prepack, like medicines, make a checklist and tape it to your Go Kit.
- Store some water jugs in your vehicle.
- In addition to the Citizen Alert system, having a neighborhood alert system in place is a good idea. Many Applegate neighborhoods use a phone tree. Be aware of who may need extra assistance.
- Have an out-of-area contact preselected to relay information about your welfare to family and friends.

### Set (Level 2): Protect your family

- Have your pets and livestock ready to go.
- Move propane barbecue appliances away from structures.
- Have a photo ID with your current address, so you will be able to return later to an evacuated area.
- Monitor local TV and radio stations for updates.
- In addition to nearby fires, pay attention to lightning and thunder. Look outside. You may have to initiate your own evacuation. If you feel threatened, leave immediately.
- Don’t wait until the last minute, or you will soon be part of the problem. You can get in the way of firefighters and rescue teams responding. You could be held up by traffic accidents. You could become a victim yourself in the ensuing chaos.
- There’s nothing wrong with evacuating on a Level 2 alert. Get ahead of the game.

### Go (Level 3): Evacuation plan

- Shut off the propane or gas.
- Leave the house lights on and the windows closed.
- Close the garage door but leave it unlocked.
- Leave your gate open. The sheriff will provide security in your neighborhood.
- Call your outside contact and let them know where you’re headed.
- Check on neighbors if time allows.
- If you find yourself in your car and surrounded by flames, it might be prudent to stay in your vehicle. Some people died in the Paradise fire when they left their cars to try to outrun the fast-paced fire. Your choices are limited at this point, so you’ll have to stave off the panic and try to make good decisions based on your immediate circumstances.

Emergency preparedness is a choice. Being prepared can save lives. For more information, visit [rvem.org](http://rvem.org).



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