

Another view on fire season preparedness

BY SANDY SHAFFER

This time of year I'm usually writing articles on how Applegate landowners should be preparing their property, homes, and family for fire season. However, a different perspective was presented to me as a member of the Board of Directors for our Applegate Valley Fire District (AVFD)! In a recent board meeting Chief McLaughlin discussed how our fire district was preparing for fire season, describing eight items that he and his staff were addressing.

One important item is making sure that we have plenty of trained volunteer firefighters to cover our seven fire stations all summer long. You can never have enough volunteer firefighters, so new volunteers are recruited in the off-season. This past winter we had seven new volunteers from across the Applegate taking part in the firefighter academy and then completing training as wildland firefighters.

Our district's staff, chiefs, and volunteer firefighters have all finished their annual refresher training, which covers topics such as fire behavior, safety, strategy, and tactics. They also had hands-on training exercises with fire attack, engine operations, water supply, and deploying fire shelters.

In early summer AVFD brings on seasonal firefighters to help cover the shift rotations. Think about the worst lightning storm you can remember in summer here in the Applegate and how many fires can start across the valley. Having two extra trained firefighters per 24-hour shift can make a huge difference in how quickly engines can get to all of those fires. So, this year the chief started one "seasonal" the second week of June and another on July 1. This extra help usually stays on through the third week of September.

Chief McLaughlin also told me that this year they plan to up-staff one additional engine with two firefighters during periods of "critical fire conditions." This crew would be located on the western side of the district for quicker responses to that area.

On another note, two members of the district's staff participated in a Rogue Valley incident management team exercise in May. Operations Chief Wolfard is trained as a planning section chief facilitator, and our office manager, Tallie Jackson, is in

training to become qualified as a public information officer. Their expertise in these fields greatly assists our district during fire season.

Did you know that AVFD has a fleet of 26 vehicles? (This includes six staff vehicles—pickups specially outfitted to provide some types of emergency responses.) Vehicles and equipment also need check-ups, so our maintenance staff is going through all of the apparatus, including our "brush engines." These vehicles are used for fighting brush and wildland fires, and they are four-wheel drive with a shorter wheelbase so they can get around on our long, narrow roads and driveways. Every component of every engine is inspected top-to-bottom on a regular basis, including tires, brakes, valves, hoses, the foam systems, water tanks, electrical, etc.

Our fire district has always had a five-year budget plan, and following that plan this year we purchased a new water tender! The new "8542" holds 3,000 gallons of water and will replace the old 1988 Freightliner that has been out at Station No. 2 near McKee Bridge for decades. The new 8542 was built to our district's specifications so that it is easier and safer to drive in the Applegate environs. As well, it was specially outfitted to be able to address brush and structural fires.

And finally, the district purchased a second radio repeater earlier this year via a successful grant application (way to go, team!). This new repeater will be used to allow our firefighters on the east end of the district to talk to the west-end folks more easily. In emergencies, communications matter!

While the new repeater has been installed with a new antenna, it is not yet in service. Chief Wolfard is waiting on the Federal Communications Commission certificate and frequency paperwork. Once that is in place, we'll contact our local, state, and federal cooperators to inform them to update their radios.

Phew! After learning about all of this preparation on the fire district's plate, I think I'd rather just clean up my defensible space, and call it good to go!

Sandy Shaffer
sassyoneor@gmail.com

Fire evacuation in Little Applegate— one family's first-hand experience

We're the family who was evacuated, and I wanted to share some useful tips from the ordeal.

We were incredibly fortunate! If the fire were any closer, we'd have been burned down. If the fire crews had been busy elsewhere without all the resources at hand, we'd have been burned down.

Forever, immense gratitude goes out to our system of firefighters and community for rallying to our aid.

Okay, the tips. Bear in mind that we had approximately 45 minutes from lightning strike to "Go."

1. Yes, lightning could actually strike in your backyard.

2. Have your most important "rebuild-your-life" documents ready at all times. Ours have been in a special bag in an easily accessible location for two years now and included photos.

3. It is fire season. Park your car with a straight shot out at all times. The driveway can congest quickly.

4. Prepare your kids for the possibility. Ours were amazing; this effort paid off.

5. Have a priority list—maybe attached to the door of your house—of what to grab/do if you can, e.g., pets, valuables, purse, computer, heirlooms, etc. Most stuff can be replaced, but we still grabbed a duffel hastily stuffed with clothes, bathroom bag, and pillows. I grabbed my basic face-painting and henna kit so my employment wouldn't stall. Some of the friends who showed up were put to work hosing

down the house and cutting down shade cloth, etc.

6. Periodically video your home, inside and out, including inside cupboards, tools, outbuildings, etc., in case you have to make an insurance claim. And make sure your policy is up-to-date with all recent improvements...just in case.

7. The fire chief will not be happy about neighbors showing up to help, people coming and going, or anyone choosing to stay behind and defend. It understandably stresses him out to have civilian safety at the back of his mind.

8. Anything you do over the years to increase access on your land—roads, forest thinning, clearing, installing good water systems, metal roofs, etc.—can make all the difference in the world. I believe our efforts in this area just paid for themselves sevenfold.

9. If you get bombed with retardant, be grateful and wash that stuff off as soon as possible (if you're as lucky as we were to be bombed and get to return to an intact home). A pressure washer really helps. Yes, it is hard on the softer plants. Corrosive stuff.

Our libraries are stocked with excellent pamphlets about fire safety and preparedness. Read them!

Thank you, firefighters, Applegate Fire District No. 9, volunteers, and my amazing, caring neighbors.

Amber Bishop and Family
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Burn reminder

Before burning outdoors any time of year, check with your fire district to make sure that day is an official burn day and not a **NO** burn day.

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