

Preparedness event readies folks for wildfire season

By **Jodi Schneider McNamee**
Correspondent

Saturday, May 2 was National Wildfire Preparedness Day. To mark the occasion, the Sisters-Camp Sherman Fire District hosted the second annual Sisters community event to help residents learn how to make their homes and neighborhoods safer from wildfire.

From Sisters Country fire history to the basics of defensible space, there were tips, tools, and teachings that everyone could use to help raise wildfire awareness and bring neighbors together to work on projects to protect homes.

Assistant fire management officer Jinny Reed from the Sisters Ranger District kicked off the program with a general discussion on the wildfire outlook in Sisters Country for this year:

“What I found to be most important during my fire management career in Central Oregon is that a strong community is very important when you’re dealing with a disaster such as wildfire. The different organizations are here to support you. It’s interagency

cooperation that helps protect you and your property. We have had several years of dry winters and our snow pack has been declining for the past 10 years, and now it’s very extreme. Part of our greatest risk for our fire district is the fires that start in the National Forests from lighting strikes. And they work their way down into our communities. So when we don’t have the normal snow-pack, and when fuels are a month or two ahead of schedule, then when we get lightning we have a greater risk of larger fires occurring.”

A PowerPoint presentation pointed out that Sisters Country has been having above-average temperatures, especially this year. These conditions may continue throughout the summer.

“The fuels in the forest are dryer than normal, and what we are seeing in April is common for August,” said Reed.

Sisters Fire Manager Ben Duda from Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) pointed out that the Oregon Forestland-Urban Interface Fire Protection Act, often referred to as Senate Bill 360, enlists the aid of

property owners toward the goal of turning fire-vulnerable urban and suburban properties into less-volatile zones where firefighters may more safely and effectively defend homes from wildfires.

“Basically it’s a law that requires homeowners to do some simple things around their home to create defensible space. It’s all about educating the public and teaching you what you can do for yourselves to protect your own homes,” Duda said. “It’s not about creating a dirt donut around your house, you can still have natural landscaping, a dry landscaping. What sets most houses on fire is the embers, ember showers. There are things around your house that you can do to protect your home and by doing that it makes it safer for the firefighters to protect your home.”

The mission of ODF primarily is for protection of private lands within our district, which includes all of Sisters Country.

“We fill in the gap between the Forest Service and the rural fire department; we bolster the initial attack,” said Duda.

After giving a brief fire

history of Sisters Country, Sisters-Camp Sherman Fire District Chief Roger Johnson explained to the public what the “2014 Greater Sisters Country Community Wildfire Protection Plan” is all about.

“The Community Wildfire Protection Plan is essentially part of our planning tool, it was all of our agency partners that came together, the Forest Service, ODF, the City of Sisters, the fire department, the county commissioners, and the county forester,” Johnson said. “We all got together and met over the course of months and we rated all of the seven communities around Sisters Country. We looked at the vegetation, we looked at the fire history, and we looked at the infrastructure. We then looked at how many exits the communities have, and what risks the infrastructures have, and are there schools there and how many people live in that area. We developed this plan that rates every community in this region based on cumulative risk, so it’s a really neat tool for you to look at and see what community that you live in, and ask how high is my risk? And what makes it such a high risk?”

“What it does for us is it helps us prioritize fuel reduction work and things like that to make your community safer. We are really proud about our partnerships within the region. It’s great to have the Forest Service and ODF and our fire department all based in the same area and working under one command system. It’s an integrative response, and that’s what it takes to be effective in the region.”

Download Sisters Country Community Wildfire Protection Plan online at www.sistersfire.com.

Sisters Fire Safety Manager Gary Marshall discussed how homeowners can maximize their fire protection around their homes.

“We have four Firewise communities in Sisters right now and are working on another one in Crossroads. Our goal is to reach out and work with the neighborhood associations and create additional Firewise communities within the district. There are steps to take to get defensible space around your home. It’s the little things that homeowners can do on their property that can give them protection.”

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