

FIRES: Access and defensible space are key to safety

Continued from page 1

Homeowners must do their part to make their properties defensible, and they must be prepared for a crisis to hit with little warning.

“We aren’t going to commit firefighters to houses that are not defensible,” Chief Olsen told *The Nugget*. “Basically, what we’re asking is, give us a fighting chance.”

Olsen and other officials noted that many homes in the district — and across the county — are not defensible in the face of a fire.

Ornamental junipers in the landscaping close to the house “are cans of gasoline next to your building, waiting to explode when they’re lit,” Chief Olsen said.

Think of the videos of Christmas trees going up like fireworks the instant fire touches them, and you have a good picture of the deadly effects of such landscaping, officials say. Bark mulch is combustible, and many residents allow dry grass to stand close to their house and creep under their decks. Pine needles that accumulate in gutters or around decks can catch an ember.

Creating defensible space around your home means creating an area of at least 30 feet around the home where combustibles are kept cleared away, trees limbed back and landscaping crafted with plants that don’t readily ignite and carry fire.

It doesn’t mean your property can’t look attractive.

“We don’t need a dirt donut,” says Ben Duda of Oregon Department of Forestry. “We’re not asking people to denude their property.”

Steps to create defensible space and tips on fire-resistant landscaping may be found at www.firefree.org. Additionally, products are available to spray on your home that can enhance its resistance to fire. Those have to be applied well before any crisis develops and should be part of a program of defensibility and not a substitute for defensible space.

Another critical element in giving firefighters a fighting chance is making sure they can get into and out of your property safely.

Olsen noted that many homes in the area affected by this month’s fire were not accessible to emergency equipment because juniper branches encroached so heavily on the driveway that a fire engine couldn’t get through.

Duda offers a simple visual to illustrate the problem:



PHOTO BY THAD OLSEN

Overgrown driveways restrict access by fire trucks.



PHOTO BY THAD OLSEN

Clearing access means your home can be defended.

“When you moved in with a U-Haul, were you scraping branches? If you were, you’re too tight.”

Firefighters have to be able to drive in to a property and have to be able to turn an engine around so they can escape quickly. If a property doesn’t allow for that, a fire chief won’t send firefighters in — because they would be risking their lives.

Chief Olsen is blunt: “There’s nothing out there that’s worth losing one of our people over.”

Sgt. Nathan Garibay of the Deschutes County Sheriff’s Office, who serves as emergency service coordinator in Central Oregon, says that properties are rated three ways:

1. Standalone — the house is so secure from fire

that firefighters don’t have to defend it.

2. Defensible — A property has the space and access needed for firefighters to make a save if fire encroaches.

3. Non-defensible: “That means it is a complete write-off because it is not safe for our people.”

He notes that county-wide there is “a very small percentage” of standalone properties and “we all have work to do.”

Property owners are advised to limb trees back to make sure a fire truck can get in and turn around — and that work should be done before fire season gets underway. Also, it is important to make sure that fire numbers are readily visible so that emergency personnel can identify where homes are.

Sgt. Garibay says, “There

are places in this county where you could drive past a house and not know there was a house there.”

In the August 11 fire, firefighters were aided significantly by air support from multiple tankers that made repeated retardant drops that allowed firefighters on the ground to get ahead of the fire.

Without the air power, “we’d have lost more houses, for sure,” said Sisters-Camp Sherman Deputy Fire Chief Tim Craig.

But that’s a resource that can’t be counted upon to save the day.

Larae Guillory, fire management officer with the Sisters Ranger District notes that “People think that they’re at our beck and call all the time.”

That is not at all the case.

Air assets are limited, and assigned to the highest priority fires. On August 11, tankers happened to be available, and could respond to the scene quickly.

“They could have been anywhere that was the highest priority,” Guillory said. “It’s not always guaranteed that you’re going to get those resources.”

Without them, the August 11 fire could have been much more devastating than it was. As it was, firefighters “made some great saves,” as Sgt. Garibay earlier told *The Nugget*. Firefighters’ work is hard and dangerous at its best, and the better prepared residents are, the more likely those saves become.

It all comes down to personal responsibility and giving those firefighters “a fighting chance.”



PHOTO BY THAD OLSEN

Firefighters can’t defend a house where there is no defensible space.



PHOTO BY THAD OLSEN

A cleared area makes a home defensible in the face of fire.

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