

Preparing for wildfire season in Sisters

While Sisters-area residents were shoveling snow, staff with the Sisters-Camp Sherman Fire District were busy preparing for another wildfire season.

With summer just a few months away, several projects are nearing completion which the fire district believes will improve the safety of area residents. Projects include enhancing partnerships with Firewise communities, increasing community preparedness for evacuations, advocating for enhanced building codes and improving the burn-permitting process.

Fire Chief Roger Johnson said, "We are seeing a growing fire problem across Oregon and the entire West Coast. We want to make sure our agency and the community are prepared for changing conditions."

While the Sisters area didn't experience a significant fire like Milli or Pole Creek last season, it did have several smaller fires that challenged responders. The Rabbit Brush Fire in the Cloverdale community destroyed two homes and several outbuildings before being controlled. Fires at Warm Springs, and the Graham Fire at Lake Billy Chinook also required activation of regional task forces to control the fires. In addition to regional fires, the District participated in two statewide mobilizations. One mobilization was for the Substation Fire in The Dalles and the

District also sent personnel and equipment to the Camp Fire in California (Paradise).

The Camp Fire was California's most devastating wildfire in history, destroying 18,800 buildings and killing 85 people. The Camp Fire has impacted the way fire officials across the country are viewing the growing fire problem, and those impacts are being felt in Sisters.

"We told our personnel as they deployed to Paradise, view the fire through the lens of Sisters," Chief Johnson said. "We wanted to know, where can we improve?"

The Fire District is focusing its efforts on prevention, community preparedness and education. Even in California where there is an abundance of firefighters, fire engines and aircraft, entire communities are still being destroyed by wildfire. The Fire District is supporting efforts to require new homes to be built with more fire-resistant construction. The Oregon Residential Specialty Code (building code) now allows communities to adopt a stricter building standard in high-risk areas.

New standards require non-combustible siding, non-flammable roofing and smaller ventilation openings. Recent studies have determined that most homes destroyed by wildland fires are ignited by flying embers. Reducing a home's vulnerability to ember intrusion will save homes and businesses

during a wildfire.

The Fire District is also planning two community events in Sisters this spring. In April there will be a meeting for all Firewise communities and homeowners associations that may be interested in becoming a Firewise community. Firewise is a program initiated by the National Fire Protection Association that teaches people how to adapt to living with wildfire and encourages neighbors to work together to prevent losses from wildfire.

The Fire District would like every neighborhood in Sisters and Camp Sherman to become a Firewise community. Also during the April meeting participants will receive information about the coming fire season and strategies to make homes in their community more resilient in the face of wildfire.

In May, the Fire District is hosting a community preparedness day where residents will be asked to evaluate their home and make sure they are ready for the coming fire season. Residents will be asked to evaluate their home for vulnerabilities. Residents will also be asked to learn where the evacuation routes for their neighborhoods are.

During a fire, the Deschutes County Sheriff's Office will implement any needed evacuations. Normally, residents will be directed to evacuate their neighborhood on the main

access roads they use every day. In some cases they may be directed to use an alternate road. The best time to become familiar with alternate evacuation routes is before the fire starts. Residents will also be encouraged to register their cell phone with the Deschutes County Sheriff's Office. By registering cell phone numbers, residents will receive emergency notifications wherever they are. To register your cell phone go to <https://www.deschutes.org/911/page/sign-deschutes-emergency-alerts>.

The Fire District is also introducing a new burn-permitting system. The permitting system will remain free, but will have a web-based feature that will allow residents to text if they want to burn. Once the Fire District receives the text, the program will instantly respond, letting the user know if it is a burn

day or not. The program will also capture the location of the burn, which will allow firefighters to know on a daily basis where fires are burning. The new system will also allow the Fire District to send notifications to users of the system.

The Fire District hopes to have the system online by May 1.

Residents are reminded that the City of Sisters does not allow burning of brush and debris within city limits.

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