

Insurers protect against wildfire

The American West is in the grip of a cycle of catastrophic wildfires that has taken dozens of lives, destroyed thousands of homes and racked up billions of dollars in suppression costs.

Few communities are more aware of the dangers of wildfire than Sisters, where 15 years of major fires have led to evacuations, economic disruption and summers filled with anxiety whenever lightning strikes.

Tammy Taylor of Bisnett Insurance in Sisters notes that several carriers offer services through a company called Wildfire Defense Systems that can provide protection and peace of mind to Sisters-area residents who live under the threat of wildfire.

With fire seasons growing longer and fire behavior more extreme, national firefighting resources are stretched to their limits. Private-sector firefighting resources provided by insurers are assisting homeowners in protecting properties against the increasing threat of wildfire.

"In this era of climate change, we are all asking what can be done to combat these rapidly escalating wildfire conditions," says David Torgerson, president of Wildfire Defense Systems (WDS). "The insurer wildfire programs that WDS serves are doing just that by providing qualified firefighters and engines to increase the survivability of policyholder properties."

The bottom line for WDS: "We help people," Torgerson said.

That help comes when people's entire way of life is under existential threat.

When wildfire looms over

properties insured by providers the company serves, WDS firefighters and engines are dispatched and go into action to prepare those properties to survive the onslaught.

Mitigation actions include closing windows and garage doors, moving firewood piles away from the home, clearing debris from under wood decks, clearing gutters, and removing debris from rooftops. WDS Insurance Engines may set up and operate sprinkler systems, apply retardant firebreaks or apply fire-blocking gel to structures.

After the fire sweeps through the area, WDS will return to policyholder homes to make sure no spot fires are smoldering.

These services are not an exclusive perk for the wealthy and famous.

"More than 90 percent of the homes in the insurer wildfire programs that WDS serves are average-value properties," Torgerson notes. "Any homeowner who wishes to have these services in their policy can contact their insurance agent and choose from more than a dozen insurers offering this service with their policies."

As Torgerson sees it, these companies are stepping up to be good citizens, providing "a real and tangible contribution to the wildfire challenges we face. The insurance companies who have committed to this effort should be recognized for contributing in part to solutions and serving their policyholders."

WDS firefighters and engines provide a valuable asset in an environment where resources are continually stretched to their limits.

Since 2008, WDS has responded to more than 550 wildfires on behalf of the insurance industry and their policyholders. All WDS firefighters are trained and certified under the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG).

WDS coordinates with Incident Command on wildfires to ensure safe and responsible activity in the fire zone. WDS is proud to proclaim an outstanding safety record on all wildfire operations since the company's inception.

The private sector resources are not supplanting public agency firefighters; they simply provide one additional element in a broad effort to prevent loss.

Many mitigation steps can be taken by homeowners themselves in preparation for fire season.

WDS believes that when it comes to fighting the growing menace of wildfire, more is better. More resources available at no additional cost to taxpayers is better; more protection at no additional cost to an insurance policyholder is better; more trained, qualified, experienced and well-equipped personnel on a wildfire is better.

He notes that WDS is precisely aligned with the imperative for all firefighters to be fully qualified and to coordinate through the Incident Command structure.

"We need to have coordination — and the Incident Command provides those opportunities," Torgerson says. "We're all in this together."

Arts association to host studio tour

The third annual Artists' Studio Tour, sponsored by the Sisters Arts Association, will take place June 29 and 30 in the studios of nearly 30 Sisters-area artists. This year, the artists of the SAA expanded the tour from a one-day event to two days, Saturday and Sunday, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

The two-day event will allow visitors to see more studios and meet more artists than would be possible in a single day. People can pace their visits to take time to get to know the art and the artists.

"This is based on the experience of other studio tours from around the country," said Bob Burgess, SAA Board Chair. "The more relaxed the pace, the greater the quality of artist-customer relationships and art sales."

Dennis Schmidling added, "As we grow this event, visitors will plan longer visits to our community. This will help our participating artists, galleries, and our community."

This is a driving tour, and it runs from Tumalo into

Sisters and out toward the neighborhoods of Eagle Crest and Squaw Creek Canyon Estates. Hayden Homes is partnering with Sisters Arts Association to allow some Bend artists, who show their work in Sisters, to set up temporary studios for the weekend in the model home at 1310 W. Hill Ave. in Sisters.

At her Tumalo studio, Danae Bennett Miller will demonstrate the process that she uses to create life-sized sculptures like the ones recently installed at the Sisters Barclay roundabout. Mel Archer's fused glass impressionist paintings are on the far end of the tour, overlooking the Middle Deschutes. In between are painters Winnie Givot, JoAnn Burgess, Sandy Melchiori, and many more.

There is no charge for art-lovers to take the tour. Directions will be available on the SAA website (www.sistersartsassociation.org) and brochures will be available in SAA member galleries in late May.

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