

# Fire safety: Start with the roof and work your way down

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With recent upheavals, a lot of folks are carrying around a constant buzz of worry. One way to put low-level anxiety to good use: by preparing for common, smaller-scale disasters.

Wildfires, evacuations, and car breakdowns still happen, after all. Preparing for those can feel empowering and offer something concrete and useful to do on quiet days.

A good first step: Improve fire safety around your home. *The Nugget* spoke with Ed Keith, Deschutes County Forester, who toured a one-acre plot of land west of town, pointing out ways to fend off potential wildfire.

Whenever evaluating a home and its property for fire safety, “start by looking at the home from the outside,” Keith recommended. “Start at the roof and work down.”

He noted nonflammable roofing material on the house, and no broken or missing tiles. “Great!” he said, but his inspection wasn’t done. “Where overlayment meets edges and corners,” he noted, flammable parts of the house are still vulnerable on or near the roof.

What does that mean? Basically, even if the roofing material itself is unlikely to catch fire, the roof may come in contact with flammable materials, such as the strip of wood trim just above the gutters.

Pine needles and other materials on the roof can cause problems. They also help the homeowner understand which areas need frequent attention throughout fire season.

“Embers will fall where you see other stuff piling up,” Keith explained. “I wouldn’t focus as much on getting every needle off of the roof so much as looking at where the needles are. If

the needles caught on fire, would they catch the house on fire?”

He pointed out wood siding on a chimney, at the base of which needles had gathered. Definitely flammable. Debris might also gather in a “cleavage” between one part of the roof and another. Often, dead leaves and needles wind up in the gutters. If this material ignites, that wooden trim may go up in flames, then spread to the rest of the house.

“For fire season, keep the gutter clear.”  
— Ed Keith

“For fire season, keep the gutter clear,” Keith instructed.

Next he looked at vents. Foundation vents around the bottom of a house let the building “breathe,” allowing moisture to escape from crawl spaces. Vents higher up on the house allow air to circulate in attics and eaves. Some provide the outside venting for a fan or dryer duct.

Research on how fires consume buildings shows that embers can easily enter a house through vents. Recent studies by IBHS, the Insurance Institute for Business & Home Safety, have led to new recommendations (along with some dramatic videos, online at [www.ibhs.org](http://www.ibhs.org)).

“Wind-blown embers are the principal cause of building ignitions,” IBHS concluded. “Although the importance of embers (also called brands or firebrands)

“Wind-blown embers are the principal cause of building ignitions.”  
— IBHS

has been understood for a number of years, the ability to evaluate them in a laboratory setting has been a relatively recent development.”

Especially in wildfire-prone areas like ours, vents should be protected by 1/8-inch screens. Previously, 1/4-inch screens were recommended.

On this particular house, Keith noticed triangular vents coming from attic spaces — with no mesh screens installed at all.

“Gable-end vents are more prone to accepting embers,” he warned.

In *The Nugget’s* next article in this series, Keith will lead us through fire safety for decks, trees, and zones. In the meantime, where can a responsible homeowner or renter find additional information?

The Firewise USA poster and checklist Keith left behind offered a panic-inducing array of checklists and diagrams. For homeowners with little knowledge of construction or architecture, the Firewise materials may simply amplify a feeling that fire safety is too overwhelming to take on.

Those who don’t know a foundation vent from a hard-scaping component, a gable end vent from a spark arrester, may have a tough time preparing their homes.

A myriad of websites from Oregon Department of Forestry, Keep Oregon Green, [www.firefree.org](http://www.firefree.org), and local fire departments offer a large but often confusing array of information. For immediate information about

wildfires currently affecting the Central Oregon region, [www.centraloregonfire.org](http://www.centraloregonfire.org) is a solid resource.

Still, it may be difficult to find basics such as, “When does fire season begin and end? What does fire season really mean, anyway? What is burn season? Is fire season in effect right now here in my part of Sisters Country?”

“Sisters-Camp Sherman Fire District can offer home assessments”  
— Ed Keith

“Start with your local fire department,” Keith advised. “Sisters-Camp Sherman Fire District can offer home

assessments, they’re the local folks. Call your local people first.”

The district also trains volunteers to become part of their Fire Corps. Everyday citizens “learn this information so they can help people,” said Keith, aiding in home assessments and other activities. Among the Fire Corps offerings at Sisters-Camp Sherman are smoke alarm testing, car seat installation, and an address sign program, which helps firefighters quickly locate a house or property in an emergency.

Find Sisters-Camp Sherman Fire District online at [www.sistersfire.com](http://www.sistersfire.com) or call the non-emergency line, 541-549-0771. Cloverdale Rural Fire Protection District is online at [www.cloverdalefire.com](http://www.cloverdalefire.com) or call 541-389-2345.

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