

Hazard? Or risk?

BY SANDY SHAFFER

I've often heard the terms *fire hazard* and *fire risk* being interchanged, by both private citizens and fire agency personnel alike. But do they mean the same thing? And, is it really important to know the difference?

My answer, as a wildland-urban interface property owner is yes, it is! I've personally found that the exercise of analyzing *risk* versus *hazard* has helped me tremendously when trying to assess my own fire danger, so that I can plan what work needs to be done around the house.

Maintaining a defensible space around your home is hard work, and it

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never ends. Every year something new comes into the equation, whether it be a new landscape tree, a new shed, new neighbors or a drought. All of these can affect your fire danger—your *hazards* and your *risks*. So let's see how they differ.

A *fire hazard* is something that is *flammable*. If exposed to heat or flame, a *hazard* can ignite, burn and spread into a wildfire or spread to engulf your home. Both are obviously undesirable.

A *fire risk* is something that can *start a fire—something that has heat*. A lightning strike can spark a fire; so can a propane torch, a vehicle's hot exhaust pipe, a campfire, and a cigarette. However, a campfire or cigarette, unlit and by themselves, are not a *fire risk*. Most *fire risks* include humans in the picture. In southwest Oregon in the past decade, over 70% of wildfires were started in some way by humans.

Fire risks depend a lot upon factors that come and go—a set of circumstances that line up to ignite a fire. One common source of wildfire *risk* comes from roads. With no vehicles on a road, there is no *risk*. However, by adding moving vehicles that can get overheated, might crash, or that have a careless smoker inside, any properties next to that road become *at risk* for wildfires.

Add to this *risk* the fact that state and county governments don't have the resources that they had in the past to cut and/or remove weeds alongside our local roadways. Three-foot tall dry weeds along roadways instead of four-inch tall cut vegetation definitely increase the *risk* of a small fire spreading quickly. (A general rule of thumb is that flames can be three times the height of the fuel!) So, consider what might not have happened if the vegetation along I-5 had been cut down last summer in the south Ashland area. Those 11 homes in the Oak Knoll neighborhood might not have burned.

Other sources of *fire risk* to wildland-urban interface properties can come from hikers, hunters, campers, fireworks, off-road vehicles, kids, and people using equipment or barbecues. So, consider

these possible *risk* factors in relation to your own property and your home, and manage your hazardous fuels accordingly. Perhaps by increasing your thinning along a road or next to federal land where the public hikes? Because, unlike lightning strikes, we *do* have some control over the human-caused *risk* factors and how they might affect our property's fire safety.

When talking about *fire hazards*, we most often consider natural and landscaped vegetation (especially dead or dry fuel) as the main *fire hazards* when looking at our defensible space. We work to remove "*hazardous fuels*", thereby mitigating our fire danger. However, many other things around our homesites are also flammable, and could easily contribute to our home burning.

Because more homes burn due to ember storms than from a fire approaching in the forest treetops, the concept of our house as a *hazard* has been emphasized in recent years. What on or around your house can cause it to burn? How can embers get inside to ignite the home? Mitigation of these *hazards* is important, and involves breaking up continuous lines of fuels connecting to the house. (This is a whole article in itself, and mitigating this "Home Ignition Zone" is a five-step process; you can find more information on it at www.firewise.com.)

Other potential *fire hazards* around the home are firewood piles, propane tanks,

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stuffed patio furniture, trash, vehicles, wood fences, and even fiber door mats, because they are all highly flammable. However, these are all manageable things to address prior to fire season each summer, or when a wildfire is approaching. Keep your homesite clean. Move firewood at least 30 feet away from structures before fire season begins, keep weeds and grass trimmed to under 4" in height and away from wooden fences or buildings, and, keep fine fuels away from propane and vehicle storage areas.

Say, did you note that I've mentioned automobiles as both *hazards* and *risks*?! And what's the component that makes the difference? Humans, of course!

Finally, don't ignore the need to thin vegetation both around your homesite and along your driveway each year because this makes the home "defensible," meaning it will be safer for firefighters to protect your home during a wildfire event. If it's not safe for them to get to your house, they may not even try.

Hopefully this discussion of *hazard* versus *risk* has been helpful, and has given you some ideas of what sort of chores you'll need to be doing this winter to make your home more fire safe.

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VOICES of the



APPLEGATE

Fall Concert Schedule

This fall season, Voices of the Applegate, our community choir that has been in existence for almost ten years, will perform three concerts led by Director Blake Weller.

The first concert will be held in the Old Presbyterian Church on California Street in Jacksonville on Friday, November 18 at 7:30 pm. The second concert will be held in the Applegate River Ranch House on Sunday, November 20, at 3:00 pm, and the third concert will be held at Pacifica's Winter Fest, 14615 Water Gap Road in Williams on Saturday, December 3, at 3:00 pm.

The choir will be performing a variety of music in four-part harmony, including songs of freedom, sacred renaissance music, a modern requiem in memory of 9/11, and several more popular songs from the current generation.

For more information, call Joan Peterson at 541-846-6988.

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