

Fire: Who does what when?

BY SANDY SHAFFER

Recent studies are indicating that there is confusion regarding some wildfire terms, and that perhaps a better understanding of these terms could help save some homes from perishing in wildfires.

Fire prevention. Fire preparedness.

Fire protection. Fire suppression.

Do you think there's a whole lot of difference between them, especially in regard to who does what? Let's take a look at definitions, starting with Webster's. And in this article we'll talk about both structural and wildfires, because often one becomes the other.

Prevent: "to keep from occurring, avert, hinder"

Prevention: "the act of preventing, effectual hindrance"

Some of my first thoughts regarding preventing unwanted fire are: not playing with matches, having a screen across your fireplace, keeping space heaters away from flammables, having your chimney cleaned annually, being aware of and following local fire season restrictions, being prepared with shovels and a hose when you do a burn pile, and checking weather conditions before you do a prescribed burn.

These mostly apply to private landowners, but commercial and agency forest workers also have a responsibility to do safety checks when working. Checking local fire restrictions would apply to being both at home and also while traveling, sightseeing or hiking. What about local or county jurisdictional responsibility to enact and enforce safe building codes? Or fire agencies communicating effectively and efficiently with residents when fire danger increases? Those are both a form of fire prevention.

Prepare: "to put things or oneself in readiness, get ready; to put in proper condition"

Preparedness: "the state of being prepared; readiness. possession of adequate...forces, ...resources and potential, especially as a deterrent to an attack"

Fire preparedness could include any/all of these actions: having a neighborhood telephone tree, having fire extinguishers in your home, providing a defensible space around your home so that firefighters can safely defend it, preparing your family for a fire (or any emergency situation) with

written evacuation plans, and even to providing an extra water supply or fuel breaks across your property that firefighters could utilize to fight a wildfire more effectively.

But think further: wouldn't teaching your livestock to quickly enter trailers be preparing them? When the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) thins trees next to a populated rural area, aren't they preparing their lands to be a little more fire resilient? And isn't it about being more prepared when our local Fire District puts up all of those signs announcing the next volunteer firefighter academy? Or when the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) helps us prepare for fire season by doing home inspections, helping us get grant funds to help pay for fuel reduction work on our rural properties? When ODF hires new crews at the start of fire season, they are getting prepared to protect private property. And of course, if you and a couple of your friends get together to clean up an elderly neighbor's rain gutters and yard before fire season, that's helping to prepare them!

Protect: "to defend or guard from attack, invasion, loss, etc." "cover or shield from injury or danger"

Protection: "the act of protecting or the state of being protected"; "a thing, person, or group that protects"

In addition to helping prepare us, the ODF also protects our private rural properties from nearby wildfires, and they provide protection for all BLM lands in our area. The US Forest Service protects their lands if a wildfire is nearby. Our local Fire District provides structural protection for our homes when a fire is near and, if they are the first on scene of a wildfire, they will start to protect our private property until others arrive. But as landowners we can also help protect our homes from a spreading wildfire by thinning our stands and removing ladder fuels, so that the wildfire's behavior is slowed to a level that allows the professional protectors to keep it away from our homes.

Going even further, parents can help protect their homes from burning by teaching their children to respect fire and be careful, and also by not leaving matches where children can find them. What about

helping someone protect? If you have a wide, open driveway, doesn't that help firefighters stay safe as they rush to help defend/protect your home and property? And if there were a large fire burning a mile away, who might be the first person to protect your home from flying embers getting in an open window or catching your patio furniture on fire? Wouldn't/shouldn't that be you, the homeowner?

Suppress: "to stop or arrest..." "to vanquish or subdue, quell or crush"

Suppression: "the act of suppressing"

We might think of fire suppression as the same as fire protection. It is mostly the same people, but suppression is actually putting out a fire. Suppressing wildfires is usually just for trained firefighters, but sometimes a fire gets so large that we have forestry workers or the National Guard helping suppress a fire. Structural fire suppression is the responsibility of our local fire districts. But because structural fire suppression is very dangerous for the untrained, going to the prevent and prepare mode is the best defense: be careful with fire in and around the house, have an adequate defensible space, use fire-resistant building materials and plants, keep dry leaves, needles and other flammables away from structures during fire season.

Anyone who lights a debris burn pile is responsible for full suppression of it when they're finished with their work (or if it begins to get out of control). But again, let's think beyond the obvious and the ways to assist fire suppression efforts. Good reflective address signs and arrows along a wide driveway speed up the arrival of fire suppressors. Having the previously mentioned extra water supply along with a water pump and a couple hundred feet of fire hose on your rural property can surely aid their suppression efforts. Evacuating when you're told to do so makes fire suppression efforts safer for firefighters. And moving up the chain of command, declaring states of emergency at the state or federal level can expedite fire suppression efforts.

To summarize (and voice my opinion), I guess I'm suggesting that everyone does have a role of some sort in fire preparedness, prevention and protection,

...preparing your family for a fire... with written evacuation plans,...an extra water supply or fuel breaks across your property...

as well as an "assist" in fire suppression. So, let's all do our share so that we don't ever have to get to that point of declaring a state of emergency in the Applegate.

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"A banker is a fellow who lends you his umbrella when the sun is shining and wants it back the minute it begins to rain."

—Attributed to Mark Twain



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