

Making rural residential areas fire resilient

BY BRIAN BALLOU

Wildfires strike rural residential areas in Jackson and Josephine counties every year, and every year homes and outbuildings are threatened and some are destroyed.

The number one way for landowners to ensure their homes and outbuildings will survive a wildfire is to take action before summer to reduce the amount of flammable vegetation around their structures.

This is not new information to many long-term residents in southwestern Oregon, and many people have taken the measures necessary to make their structures defensible against wildfire. State and county laws have detailed instructions about what kind of vegetation to cut and how big a fuel break must be around homes and other structures. In many areas, landowners are banding together with their neighbors to take *community action*

toward wildfire protection. This latter scenario *holds more promise* since it reflects the adoption of an attitude to take action against a very solvable problem.

A new program, called Fire Adapted Communities, strives to not only provide information about protecting structures and wildland landscapes against wildfire damage, but also instills the will among residents to take ownership of the problem—and the solutions. Following a checklist to meet state or county fuel-break regulations can reduce the threat of wildfire damage, but the beneficial effects are short-lived. Adopting wildfire-protection principles and practices as a necessary fact of life results in structures and landscapes that are *continuously* resilient against wildfire.

Making a fire-adapted community comprises many elements. Structures need to have fire-

resistant roofing, such as asphalt shingles or metal. Flammable landscaping plants, like juniper and cypress, shouldn't be growing near windows or tucked under roof eaves. The landscape around a home shouldn't have dead vegetation or thickets of highly flammable brush, primarily thickets of blackberry and manzanita. Tall, dry grass around structures and along the roadside and property lines should be mowed before fire danger becomes extreme. An address sign for the home should be at the foot of the driveway, and the driveway itself must be passable for fire trucks. A clear escape route should be part of the escape plan for every resident.

Southwest Oregon is a fire environment. It is impossible to exclude wildfire from the landscape. In fact, by trying to exclude fire from the landscape for so many years, the problem has become worse. Where there were once many grass and oak woodlands, there are now brushfields and overgrown conifer forests. It is within these overgrown wildland areas that thousands of homes now stand.

Residents need to make every effort to *not cause* a wildfire. Making the

effort to keep homes, outbuildings, and private lands less vulnerable to wildfire year after year is a practical step toward accepting ownership of the solution. Fire departments and wildfire protection agencies will always be there to do whatever is possible to save lives and property from fire. But working together—fire protection professionals and landowners—will ensure a long-term favorable outcome when the inevitable strikes.

For more information about Fire Adapted Communities, contact the Applegate Valley Fire District's office at 541-899-1050, the Oregon Department of Forestry at 541-664-3328, or online at www.fireadapted.org.

And don't forget that classes are available through the Oregon State University Extension Service in Jackson and Josephine counties to help landowners learn strategies to not only protect their lands against wildfire, but also improve forest health, exclude invasive plants, and protect soil, air and water resources.

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INTENSITY LEVEL

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much of March due to "unsafe" fire or weather conditions. Private landowners and professional fuels folks alike are hard-pressed to find enough days to get our slash piles burned.

Australia has seen some wicked weather! In 2013 temperatures were 45 degrees Celsius (113 degrees Fahrenheit!) for *over a week* when their "bush" fires broke out. In October alone they had 627 fires within a two-week period, burning 405,000 acres!

Last year's Washington State Carlton Complex (in July) started with an extraordinary lightning storm: 2,500 strikes with a *50 percent ignition rate* (10 to 15 percent ignition is more the average). Within days, erratic 45-mile-per-hour winds had blown four fires in four different communities out of control. One run burned 123,000 acres in nine hours! (The size of that area is one-third *larger* than the city of Portland.) All firefighters could do was try to move the fires around homes. In the end, over 300 homes and a lot of community infrastructure were destroyed. What I found interesting was that the damage was so widespread that there was no power to *surviving* homes for *nearly a month* after the fires were out! This seriously hampered post-fire communications and rehabilitation.

I also heard the fire chief from Twain Harte, California, say that recently they have been replacing their "worst historical fire" on an *annual basis*. Their Rim Fire last year sent smoke all the way to Salt Lake City! So, wildfires are not just a "local" problem.

Everyone in Reno was using the term "situational awareness" when discussing the wildfire picture. The whole western region of the country seems to be in the same boat regarding weather and drought, wildfire and wildland-urban interface conditions. As one speaker said, "This isn't going away, so we have to get our head around it."

The other disturbing message I heard in Reno was that residents in several of these severe fires were "waiting to be told" to evacuate. They didn't take the initiative themselves. Many others were unaware of the danger approaching. While I didn't hear that any lives were lost, the concept that urban interface residents are not aware of smoke, fire, lightning or severe weather in their area and how it might affect their property (or their life?) is astounding, and scary.

Are we like that here in the Applegate? I like to think not, but I also wouldn't want to have to test the theory. We are in wildfire country. We need to address our own property's fire risks by reducing fuels on and around our homes and access routes. We need to develop, agree to, and *practice* implementing a family evacuation plan, including pets and/or livestock. No one else is going to do this for us.

We need to pay attention to weather and fire danger, because Mother Nature is often unpredictable, moving at her own schedule and intensity. In severe weather, phones and social media might not be operable. *You may not get that reverse 911 call!*

Mother Nature doesn't use social media and neither should we when it comes to possible life- or property-threatening fire weather. Develop and maintain your own "situational awareness" by being prepared and alert.

This is our valley, our home, and our responsibility.

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Note: *If you would like free information regarding defensible space, fuels reduction, or evacuation planning, call the Applegate Fire District (541-899-1050), the Oregon Department of Forestry (Jackson County: 541-664-3328; Josephine County: 541-474-3152), or your local fire district.*

Ruch School students create firewise demonstration sites and learn how to be fire adapted

The Applegate Valley Fire District, the Southern Oregon Forest Restoration Collaborative, the Bureau of Land Management, and Ruch School sixth- and seventh-grade students came together to assess Ruch School for potential fire hazards before fire season begins.

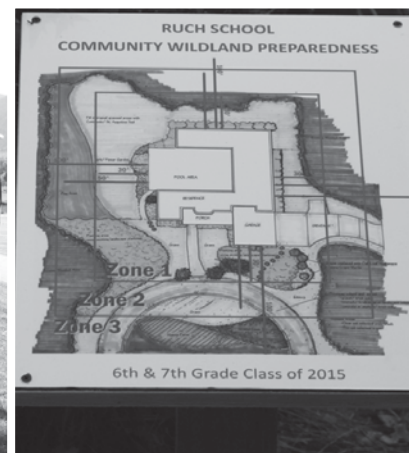
Students learned about fire science, fire behavior, fire-adapted ecosystems and communities, and the three zones that make up a defensible space. They put what they learned into practice by assessing their own school, helping build firewise demonstration sites, planting fire-resistant plants, and clearing fuels on the school grounds. Students then went to their own homes to assess them for potential fire hazards.

In addition, students nominated vulnerable members of the community to receive assistance from Oregon Department of Forestry crews to do fuel-reduction work around their homes.

The project was funded by a \$500 firewise grant offered by the National Fire Protection Association and sponsored by State Farm Insurance. The Plant Oregon nursery and community members donated plants, and Advanced Landscape Services donated mulch.

This project integrates fire science and safety on school grounds to be used for educational purposes for years to come and brings community awareness about defensible space and the need to be prepared for the upcoming fire season. Community members are encouraged to stop by Ruch School to see what the students have created.

For more information on creating a defensible space around your home, please stop by the Applegate Fire District Office at 18489 North Applegate Road or call Carey Chaput at 541-899-1050.



— See more articles online — www.applegater.org

- Annual Children's Festival, July 11 to 13, at Britt Gardens, Jacksonville
- "First graders become published authors at Ruch Community School" by Curtis Mekemson
- Lavender Trail, June 26 to 28: "Lavender is a 'blooming' business in the Applegate Valley"

Burn reminder

Before burning outdoors any time of year, check with your fire district to make sure that day is an official burn day and not a **NO** burn day.

Jackson County • 541-776-7007
Josephine County • 541-476-9663 (Press 3)

