

DISASTER PREP

By DAVE ROBINSON
Special to the Siuslaw News

Holiday preparedness

My mother had a saying, "Christmas comes the same time every year, two weeks too early!" She was an elementary teacher and there were always parties, programs, pageants and presents for which to prepare.

This year seems no different.

December's calendar fills up pretty quickly and the "Big Day" will be upon us in no time.

Every year I read reports of Christmas tragedy in the form of house fires. Make sure your home and family are safe this season by following a few simple safety rules.

Inspect your Christmas tree lighting for worn wiring, overloaded circuits and and if you are still using those screw-in bulbs, make sure there are no broken bulbs or exposed filaments.

One of every three Christmas tree fires is caused by electrical problems. Christmas tree fires are not common, but when they occur, they are likely to be serious. On average, one of every 40 reported home Christmas tree structure fires results in a death, compared to an average of one death per 142 total reported structure fires.

A heat source too close to the tree causes one of six reported Christmas tree fires.

More than half (56 percent) of home candle fires are a result of something flammable situated too close to the flame. There are a significant higher percentage of candle-related fires in December than other months of the year.

If you're still putting up a "real" tree every year, make sure you keep it well-watered. If you've ever

burned your tree after Christmas, you know how fast it can go up.

Here are a few more tips from the experts:

- Keep candles at least 12 inches away from anything that burns.

- Make sure your tree is at least three feet away from heat sources like fireplaces, radiators, space heaters, candles or heat vents.

- Get rid of your Christmas tree immediately after the holiday.

- Connect no more than three strings of mini lights, or no more than 50 lights of the screw-in variety.

Oh, and one more thing:

- Keep your fire extinguisher handy. It takes less than 30 seconds for a dry tree to go up in flames.

No time to run out to the garage and grab it.

Winter is statistically the worst for home fires. Cold

weather coupled with holiday decorations and overburdened heating and electrical systems boost the danger-factor significantly.

Take care of your family this year and walk through your home with "fresh eyes" looking for anything that may cause a fire.

Let's keep our families and homes safe this holiday season.

Here's wishing you and yours a very Merry Christmas!

Dave Robinson is the postmaster in Bandon, Ore., and author of "Disaster Prep for the Rest of Us." He may be contacted at disasterprep.dave@gmail.com. Visit his website for more disaster preparedness tips, www.disasterprepdave.blogspot.com.

Local veterans group seeks to help other vets

The Florence Area Veterans' Relief Agency (FAVRA) is a nonprofit subsidiary of the local American Legion Francis M. Yost Post 59.

FAVRA is a group of local veterans helping other local veterans with limited, emergency, stop-gap grant funding for food, shelter, utilities, medical needs, transportation or other personal, immediate needs.

It requires the recipient to meet a simple qualification process, after which the veteran usually has a check or cash

in-hand within 24 hours.

The help FAVRA provides stays anonymous, personal, discrete and respectful.

It's not a member of a government agency or VA; it understand fellow veterans and doesn't ask anything from them or track them. They simply verify their status and then help them.

Those who would like to join FAVRA, or make a tax-deductible contribution, can visit FAVRA.org.

To contact FAVRA for assistance, call 541-590-0395.

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Property tax relief offered for storm damage

Property taxes on real property that has experienced a casualty loss due to either an "Act of God" or a fire during the tax year may be eligible for a reduction of tax — referred to as a "proration of tax."

This property tax relief applies to significant damage to taxable structures (homes and businesses) — not personal property, such as vehicles and building contents.

"We want to be proactive in reaching out to taxpayers during times of hardship," said Mike Cowles, Lane County assessor. "The process for requesting a proration of taxes is fairly quick and simple and our staff is available to answer any questions."

The application and additional information can also be

found at www.lanecounty.org/AT.

Applications are also available at the Lane County Department of Assessment and Taxation, located in the Public Services Building at 125 East Eighth Ave., in Eugene.

The office is located on the lower level and is open from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., Monday through Thursday.

Property owners can also call 541-682-4321 during those same hours.

Property owners are encouraged to file applications for property tax relief as soon as possible to assist in accurately determining real property damage. The law requires that the application for proration of property taxes be submitted to the Assessment and Taxation

Office no later than the end of the tax year in which the damage or destruction occurs, or 60 days after the date the property was damaged or destroyed, whichever is later.

If property was damaged or destroyed by the recent storm, property owners must file an application for proration by June 30, 2017.

For damaged property, the percentage of assessed value lost is multiplied by the total tax on the account for the month the property was damaged and for each month the property remains damaged during the tax year.

The property owner is required to notify the assessor's office when the damage has been repaired. The refund is made when the property is repaired or the fiscal year

ends, whichever comes first.

The value on the account for the tax year in which the damage or destruction occurred is not reduced.

Oregon law allows only a proration of the tax, not an adjustment to the value in the current tax year. The property value will always be the value of the account as of the assessment date for the tax year in which the taxes are being prorate.

When the account is revalued on the assessment date following the occurrence, any loss in value will be noted and reflected on the next year's tax statement.

State to hold refunds until February

SALEM — Oregon Department of Revenue officials have announced that no personal income tax refunds for the 2016 tax year will be issued until after Feb. 15, 2017.

The refund hold will allow data-matching of amounts claimed on returns to what employers report on Forms W-2 and 1099.

"Data-matching reduces potential refund fraud, and fraud is a problem we want to tackle from every direction we can," said Ken Ross, manager of Revenue's anti-fraud efforts. "The IRS, Oregon, and other states are taking similar measures to prevent potential fraud, capitalizing on the requirement that employers submit W-2 and 1099 information by Jan. 31."

Ross referred to the IRS' announcement earlier this year that taxpayers claiming the Earned Income Tax Credit or the Additional Child Tax Credit won't see their federal refunds until after Feb. 15.

Revenue stops millions of dollars in fraudulent refunds each year: In 2015, anti-fraud efforts stopped \$6.9 million in fraudulent refunds claimed on almost 4,000 different returns.

Fraudsters are known to submit fraudulent returns early, trying to go unnoticed among the many early filers requesting legitimate refunds.

Among returns filed before Feb. 15, approximately 90 percent request a refund.

"No one wants to hold up a taxpayer's legitimate refund, and taxpayers have been pretty understanding of the need to combat fraud," Ross said. "We take very seriously our responsibility to make sure tax dollars go to the legitimate owners and not to fraudsters."

Visit www.oregon.gov/dor to get forms, check the status

of your refund or make payments, call 503-378-4988 (or 800-356-4222 toll-free) or email questions.dor@oregon.gov for more information.

For TTY for hearing or speech impaired, call 800-886-7204.

During peak calling times, you may experience an extended wait.

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