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Future from A1

get back together?"

Planning for the most likely disaster events would appear a reasonable approach and, for many preparedness strategies, there is some crossover.

The American Red Cross, for instance, suggests that households keep two food and water survival kits: one three-day kit for evacuations and one two-week supply for a lengthy home stay. Whether it be a snowstorm, fire or earthquake, a stock of certain basic supplies will always ensure at least a modicum of impact mitigation.

Beyond that, interconnectedness with one's community can be an invaluable resource in itself, easing the burden of self-reliance. Community response teams, amateur radio operation or even just being acquainted with a neighbor are all useful tools in emergency planning.

Weaving into this fabric of preparedness the knowledge of one's environment and perception of future threats, a truly resilient community may emerge.

As a community embracing both urban and rural identities, the Cottage Grove area presents its own brand of emergency preparedness challenges. For those leaning more rurally, the annual threat of fire has hung particularly heavy in the last several years.

Taking the Heat

Alex Rahmlow is the fire planning coordinator with the Oregon Department of Forestry's Western Lane District. Rahmlow has seen a steady increase of wildfires in the area, but he doesn't think Cottage Grove's surrounding communities have it the worst.

"We look better than Medford," he said, "and we look worse than Portland."

Fire severity and frequency depend on a myriad of factors. Weather, fuel accumulation and population density are some of the heavier influencers.

"If you look at the last 10 years, we've had record-breaking fire seasons in and around Cottage Grove," he said. "Oregon as a state — it's been record-breaking in both cost and acres burned. But

then you take this year, for example, and we're right back to normal or a little bit below average."

In a January article in the journal *Forest Ecology and Management*, researchers established that high severity wildfires have been on the rise in the region.

"Both the frequency and size of large wildfires have increased in the past 30 years in the western U.S., as has the length of the fire season," it reads.

As climate change provides conditions for the growth of more biomass and fuel due to wetter winters and springs, the drying of those fuels is enhanced by summertime droughts. The article cites estimates that half of observed trends in wildfires are due to such climate change.

This year to date, the Oregon Department of Forestry reports that there have been 666 fires in the state, 516 of which were human-caused and 150 caused by lightning strikes.

"Cottage Grove is kind of right on that transition of coast to cascades," said Rahmlow. "And cascades typically get a lot of the lightning. So that's where a lot of our natural starts come from."

The human hand in the rise of fire events, however, is undeniable.

"There's a direct correlation to the number of people that are living in the wildland and the amount of starts that you have," Rahmlow said. "So, the higher recreation or higher density of people living out there, in and around forests, you're going to have more starts."

With the steadily increasing human population showing no signs of slowing down, people may have to get used to the idea of being vigilantly fire-conscious. Fortunately, there are things people can do to prepare.

"Wildfires are one of those few natural disasters that you can actually drastically reduce the impact of with proper planning and preparation," said Rahmlow.

One way the average citizen can reduce risk to their own home is with a "defensible space" strategy. As the severity of a fire is largely dependent on available fuel, manipulating the arrangement of that fuel can reduce the

likelihood of a severe fire event.

"If you can separate the canopy from the ground, then you've effectively reduced the potential severity of a fire in that area," Rahmlow said.

This means pruning tree limbs to eight feet and keeping ground vegetation short in order to create a vertical separation between fuel sources. Likewise, thinning out crowded trees by spacing conifers about eight feet apart can break up the horizontal continuity.

Rahmlow also recommends a defensible space of at least 30 feet around a home.

"Your 30-foot space should be lean, clean and green, so 30 feet around your home is essentially a no-burn area," he said. "Defensible space usually goes up to 150 feet."

California's Camp Fire in 2018 was the deadliest and most destructive in the state's history, leveling the town of Paradise.

"Part of the issue was ... you have houses that are built next to each other that are within that initial fuel break," said Rahmlow, creating what he called "a forest of homes."

California passed a landmark building code in 2008 requiring fire safeguards for homes, which included 100 feet of defensible space. According to *The Sacramento Bee*, "about 51 percent of the 350 single-family homes built after 2008 in the path of the Camp Fire were undamaged."

With the prospect of more frequent and intense fires in the future, making defensible space could be in homeowners' best interests, even if not required by the State of Oregon's building code.

Rural residents may have other options as well. As mentioned previously in this series, Dorena residents Dan Holt and Cal Swanson have taken it upon themselves to provide fire safeguards to the area with the purchase of their own fire engines.

While finding volunteers to be on call for emergency responses is its own challenge, perhaps the hardest will be keeping the volunteers trained on how to operate the vehicles, pumps and hoses.

"If I haven't seen someone in six months, they won't remember how to do it," said Swanson. "You

need a cadre of volunteers that practice occasionally."

On top of training and gathering the manpower, an additional catch is liability.

"That's the challenge, is if you form a fire district or a fire department, all this equipment has to be certified," said Swanson.

Because they have no plan to start their own district, Holt and Swanson cannot provide insurance to volunteers — any emergency response would have to be done at a volunteer's own risk.

Swanson, who spent 20 years in the Navy, was trained to fight shipboard fires and, although acknowledging the equipment differed, "I feel like I know how to handle a hose," he said.

Legal recourse from others is a thorny issue as well.

"I would rely on the Good Samaritan Law of, 'I was rendering aid,'" said Swanson.

Though Oregon does indeed have Good Samaritan Law under ORS 30.800, the statute provides protection for "medically trained persons" and may not protect people from legal liability resulting from a victim's injury if the aid provider is rendering care outside of their level of training.

Despite these hurdles, some Dorena residents have expressed comfort in knowing that neighbors may be able to come to their rescue should the situation arise.

Issues like this, though, are not always on county or state agency radar.

To address this, Lane County is currently conducting a survey of residents' perceptions of wildfire risk for its Community Wildfire Protection Plan. Not only will the survey provide agencies a sense of where to focus, but an updated plan may allow the county to receive federal funds to reduce wildfire risk.

Residents can take the survey by visiting www.lanecounty.org/fireplan.

At Fault

Just as people in the Pacific Northwest are becoming accustomed to more wildfires, another impending disaster rests invariably in the back of their minds: Cascadia.

See **FAULT 9A**

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