

Protecting the coast from deadly wildfires

Protect your home ahead of time, say fire officials

By **DAVE FISHER**
For Cannon Beach Gazette

Could it happen here on the North Coast, a wildfire comparable to the November 2018 Camp Fire that, when it was over, was the deadliest and most destructive wildfire in California history?

The answer to that question posed by fire officials to a standing-room-only crowd of about 100 people gathered at Pine Grove Community Center in Manzanita at the end of January was, hypothetically speaking, yes.

The similarities between Cannon Beach, Manzanita and other north Oregon coast communities and the densely populated foothill community of Paradise, California are striking: homes and structures nestled in wooded areas, uneven terrain, long periods without rainfall, windy conditions at times, older populations, and few escape routes.

Looking back at the Camp Fire that engulfed Paradise, Ed Wallmark, Tillamook District Protection Unit Forester for the Oregon Department of Forestry, said he wasn't there "to scare anybody," but the statistics he offered were sobering nonetheless. The fire was among the deadliest in U.S. history, said Wallmark, causing at least 86 civilian fatalities, most of which incurred the first few hours as people tried to escape the firestorm. In all, the fire covered nearly 240 square miles and destroyed nearly 14,000 homes. At its height, 52,000 people evacuated the area affected. However, unlike a typical wildfire, in Paradise the fire sparked structure-to-structure ignitions.

While the discussion as to what might happen locally dealt with hypothetical situations, Perry Sherbaugh, fire chief for Nehalem Bay Fire and Rescue, recounted an incident that occurred in July 2014, three days after the Fourth of July celebration in Manzanita. Strong afternoon winds rekindled a beach fire among the logs blowing embers into a dry vegetated hillside. The ensuing wildfire climbed the bank and threatened ocean view houses perched atop.

"The fire," said Sherbaugh, "climbed uphill in about a minute's time and was the result of a likely beach fire that hadn't been entirely extinguished."

Fortunately, only four homes were damaged, but it could have been much worse as, like Paradise, the area affected is densely populated. To make matters worse, with only one escape road at their disposal, those uphill from the fire would likely have been trapped.

Summertime is particularly worrisome to fire officials as conditions are typically dry during what is the height of tourist season. "High public use areas increase the risk of fires," Sherbaugh noted.



The aftermath of wildfire near Manzanita in July 2014 shows the burnt trail the fire left. Fire officials say it could have been worse.



Ed Wallmark of the Oregon Department of Forestry along with Chris Beswick and Perry Sherbaugh of Nehalem Bay Fire and Rescue discuss measures homeowners can take to protect their homes should a wildfire threaten them.

Added Wallmark, "Of the 1,115 wildfires in Oregon in 2018, 896 were human caused while 219 were caused by lightning. Lightning-caused fires burned more acres, but the gap between lightning-caused fires and those attributed to humans is closing."

While the scale of the California fires is probably much larger than would be experienced here, the conditions that helped create the widespread devastation in California still exist, especially in communities like Manzanita, Cannon Beach, Arch Cape and Gearhart where urban homes interface with natural wooded areas. According to Wallmark, "Homeowners who live in such areas can make a big difference to reduce the risk of their home burning with pre-fire activities. The biggest thing is by mitigating fuels close to structures."

To that end, the creation of defensible space around one's home and "hardening" the structure itself is most important. Of the three zones of defensible space, Zone 1, beginning from the framed edge of the house, is most important. If you have grass, keep it cut short or,

better yet, replace with decorative rock or some other inflammable cover; remove shrubs next to exterior walls; keep gutters free of needles and debris; eliminate tight places where embers could potentially land; don't store firewood or other flammable materials next to the house, garage or carports, and even underneath decks. As far as hardening the house, metal, clay or cement tile roofs offer the best protection. Fire resistant siding helps too.

"These are things you can do over time that will help,"

said Wallmark. "I'm not saying you have to go out and do right now, but it's something to keep in mind, do the little things as you can. Like I said, I'm not here to scare anyone, but we can be better prepared."

The January 29 presentation in Manzanita was organized by the Emergency Volunteer Corps of Nehalem Bay, which offers these additional safety tips for area residents — sign up for reverse 9-1-1 or Nixle to receive public safety alerts immediately, keep a go bag and emergency supplies in your car and know of at least two evacuation routes. In addition, have a family plan in place so separated family members know how to proceed in an emergency.

Much more emergency preparedness information is available online at www.Firewise.org, www.evcnb.org, and www.wildfiresg.org. In addition, the Clatsop and Tillamook County offices of the Oregon Department of Forestry offer free onsite home assessments as to how homeowners can reduce wildfire risks. In Clatsop County, Department of Forestry can be reached at 503-325-5451; in Tillamook County, 503-842-2545.

Wall Street Forestry presentation coming to Tolovana Hall Feb. 8

Cannon Beach Gazette

"Wall Street Forestry and The Climate Crisis: Putting People Before Profits," a talk by Chuck Willer of the Coast Range Association, comes to Tolovana Hall, 3779 S. Hemlock, on Friday, Feb. 8, at 7 p.m.

Willer's presentation will be the first full exploration of the Coast Range Association's assessment of Wall Street forestry in

light of the climate crisis. Given the warnings from the scientific community that society has 12 years to move into a full carbon transition, Willer will address what is likely warranted for Oregon's corporate forests.

The conclusions drawn and recommendations offered will be a first in Oregon's evolving discussion of climate, forests and the required economic transition we now face.

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