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PRESS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WILDFIRE PREP

Do all you can to protect your property before a fire starts.

In past decades, when rural areas were less populated, wildfires often consumed natural fuels without great harm to landowners or property. Today, with people and property scattered throughout much of the rural landscape, wildfires can quickly lead to devastation of property and lives.

While eliminating wildfire events isn't feasible, there are ways to help reduce potential for a wildfire to destroy a building site. There are also cost-share programs and online resources to help rural landowners develop and execute an effective plan.

Mark Frickel, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Nebraska Forest Service, IANR, Wildland Urban Interface Forester, says his office recommends that landowners consider utilizing the National Firewise Communities Program resources to evaluate the threat wildfire might pose to their home and buildings. Their website: <https://www.nfpa.org/Public-Education/Fire-causes-and-risks/Wildfire/Firewise-USA>.

"This program generally focuses on major buildings and homes, providing information about how to identify elements of a home or building that are susceptible to fire," Frickel says. "Airborne embers from a wildfire can quickly ignite shake shingles or dry leaves trapped in a gutter. Dry pine needles also provide ready fuel for a wildfire."

Embers from a wildfire could quickly ignite other areas around a home such as patio furniture, wooden decks and areas of dried weeds. Frickel advises homeowners to survey a 30-foot perimeter around all buildings to help identify and remove/reduce these types of manageable fuels.

“If the perimeter includes vegetation or trees, those should be well manicured, so they don’t touch the building and are as far from the building as possible,” Frickel says. “Juniper and pine trees are especially vulnerable to fire.”

Firewise recommendations include creating a “defensible space” around structures by thinning trees and brush and selecting fire-resistant plants and ignition-resistant building materials. Consulting firefighters to develop an emergency plan will also help reduce potential for fire damages. Greenhouses and landscaping companies can assist with selecting appropriate trees and shrubs for a specific area.

“When you’re talking about dealing with fire outside the home, evaluate your route to escape an approaching wildfire,” Beth Arens, University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s Nebraska Forest Service Forest Fuel Management Specialist, says. “It’s critical to have a route where you won’t encounter falling trees or a blocked road. Clearing a 150-foot buffer along your driveway will make it easier to escape a fire without being injured or blocked in.”

Arens encourages landowners to learn about the National Forest Service (NFS) cost-share programs and online resources that assist with thinning dense forests and removal of ladder fuels (ground vegetation that allows a fire to spread into a tree canopy).

Through a Forest Fuels Reduction program, the National Forest Service reimburses eligible landowners for up to 75% of the costs (with per-acre caps) for tree removal, piling and pile-burning when necessary. The NFS Redcedar Forest Management program reimburses eligible landowners for up to 75% of costs for redcedar forest management, including tree removal, piling and pile disposal.

Additional programs include Burned Land Fuels Reduction Grants, Forest Restoration Grants, Firewise Defensible Space Grants, and Hazardous Fuels Reduction. Details about the programs are available at <https://nfs.unl.edu/fuels-assistance>.

Arens also advises landowners to develop a written plan to help prepare for an unexpected evacuation. The plan should outline key items to take in the event that returning home takes a while.

“Each family member can identify important items they would need if emergency evacuation is necessary,” Arens says. “That might include prescription medications, a change of clothes and items for pets. Generally, evacuees are directed to a specific location, such as a school or fairground where more information about a fire is available. Hopefully there is also help from emergency agencies such as the Red Cross, too.”

Maintaining the plan and making it easily accessible could be especially helpful if a young family member was home alone at the time of an evacuation order. Having a well-thought-out plan ahead of time also reduces the anxiety a sudden evacuation order can produce.

“You may have only seconds to respond to an evacuation notice, in which case you may not be able to take anything with you,” Arens says. “People are the only thing that’s irreplaceable. However, if you have time, even a backpack with a few essential items can be a big help if you have to leave your home.”

Frickel advises considering what areas around a building site could offer shelter from a fire if escape becomes a problem. If crops are green or have been harvested with little crop residue, a field may offer shelter from a fast-racing fire.

“A green alfalfa field could be a good place to seek shelter, or an area like a hay meadow, where vegetation is typically low and green,” Frickel says. “Having those options in mind well

ahead of an emergency can reduce the likelihood that panic diminishes your ability to make those kinds of decisions.”

Arens notes that residents who resist evacuation should keep in mind the danger that rescuers could face if the resident requires help to survive a fire.

“It’s our right to make that choice,” Arens says. “However, we may put others in grave danger by remaining in a fire’s path.”

Most wildfires burn rapidly, quickly covering a large area. In addition to flames, these kinds of fires bring high temperatures, smoke, toxic gases and soot that can be carried for tens or hundreds of miles. Breathing wildfire smoke can lead to respiratory and heart problems.

“The path of a wildfire is unpredictable,” Frickel says. “During a fire in the city of Blair (Nebraska), a grass fire quickly spread so fast it surrounded many houses before the fire department could respond.”

Because wildfire burns so intensely, water sources such as a garden hose are generally greatly inadequate in quenching the flames.

“Don’t hesitate to leave a site if you believe fire is putting your life in danger,” Frickel says. “You can always turn around if it isn’t as bad as it seems. Someone may think you overreacted, but you’re safe. That’s always the priority.”

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