

Reducing Wildfire Risk for the Small Farmer and Landowner

By Brian Tuck Wasco County Extension Agent & Stu Nagel, Mid-Columbia Fire and Rescue Fire Marshall

(Note: A portion of the information for this article was provided by SAFECO Corporation.)

As we enter spring and plants begin to green-up, thoughts of small farmers and landowners need to turn to wildfire safety, particularly after the year we just experienced. Now is the time to clear fire-prone vegetation near your home and farmstead. It should be stressed that even with the nearly normal winter rains, we still are in drought conditions particularly in the eastern portions of the Mid-Columbia. Deep soil moisture is still short and this will affect plant health due to greater plant stress from pests and diseases and make plants even more fire-prone.

To reduce the potential risks for serious loss due to wildfire for the small farmer and landowner there are several key points to consider which include:

1. Plan for your safety

Develop a disaster plan and plan several escape routes away from your home – by car or by foot and where family members are to meet.

Talk to your neighbors about wildfire safety. Consider how you could help neighbors with special needs such as the elderly or disabled. Make plans how to take care of children who may be on their own if parents can't get home

2. Define your Defensible Space.

Defensible space is a buffer zone, a minimum 30-foot non-combustible area around your home and outbuildings that reduces the intensity and risk of a wildfire from starting or spreading to structures. Although a 30-foot distance is standard, additional clearance of as great as 100 feet or more may be needed depending on slope and height, type and size of plant material near the structures, and other conditions such as weather.

Defensible space not only helps protect your home in the critical minutes it takes a fire to pass, it also gives firefighters an area to work in and could well make the difference between whether a house or other structure can or cannot be saved.

Also installing alternative water sources (e.g. cistern or pond) for firefighters is advisable as electric power often fails or is shut off during a fire making your well and outside faucets useless.

3. Reduce Flammable Vegetation, Trees and Brush Around Structures.

When needed, replace flammable landscaping with fire-resistant plants. Choose plants with loose branching habits, low growing, non-resinous woody material, high moisture content in leaves, and little seasonal accumulation of dead vegetation. An excellent web site that lists fire-resistant plants for Oregon home landscapes can be found at:

<http://extension.oregonstate.edu/deschutes/FireResPlants02.pdf> You can also visit your local home or garden center to find fire-resistant plant materials.

4. Remove or Prune Trees.

If you live in a wooded area, reduce the density of surrounding forest by removing or thinning overcrowded or weakened trees so there is about 10 feet between tree crowns. Check with local agencies for guidelines on tree removal before clearing or thinning your property.

Be sure to prune low-hanging branches up to eight to 10 feet to keep a ground fire from climbing into the upper branches. Limbing up these “ladder fuels” will cut the chances of ground fires climbing into tree canopies. Reduce the number of native shrubs under trees that could act as ladder fuels into the trees above.

5. Cut Grass and Weeds Regularly.

Fire spreads rapidly in dry grass and many of our local weeds, particularly cheatgrass, ryegrass, knapweed and other annual and perennial grasses and broadleaf weeds. Mow grasses and other low vegetation and keep them well watered especially during periods of high fire danger.

6. Relocate Wood Piles, Leftover Building Materials and Other Burnable Items.

Stack all wood, building debris and other burnable materials at least 30 feet away from your home and other buildings. Clear away flammable vegetation within 10 feet of wood/debris piles or other burnable materials as an additional safeguard.

7. Keep It Clean.

Especially your roof. Clear pine needles, leaves and debris from your roof, gutters and yard to eliminate ignition sources. Keeping areas around structures free of burnable materials will reduce wildfire hazards.

8. Signs, Addresses and Access.

Easy-to-read road signs and address numbers that are visible from the road are critical in aiding firefighters to find your home quickly during a fire or other emergency. Make

sure there is safe, easy access to your property that can accommodate emergency vehicles and space for them to turn around. Bridges should be able to support the weight of emergency vehicles. Driveways should be trimmed of peripheral vegetation to allow emergency vehicles to see driveways and access structures.

9. Rate Your Roof.

Your roof is the most vulnerable part of a structure. If you have a wood shake roof, consider treatment or replacement to make it more fire-resistant. Also use fire-resistant siding to further improve building safety.

10. Additional Resources

There are a number of very good free resources available for small Farmers and landowners on wildfire prevention including several publications from SAFECO Corp including “Fire Tips” which can be found on their web site at:

<http://www.safeco.com/safeco/about/giving/firetips.asp> and “Wildfire” at <http://www.safeco.com/safeco/catastrophe/wildfire/>. Other websites include:

Firewise: <http://www.firewise.org>, Oregon Dep. Of Forestry:

<http://www.odf.state.or.us>, Colorado State Forestry Service:

<http://www.colostate.edu/Depts/CSFS/homefire.html>, US Forest Service:

<http://www.fs.fed.us/land#fire>, FireFree: <http://www.firefree.org>

Stu Nagel, Mid-Columbia Fire & Rescue Fire Marshal has available “Living with Fire: A Guide for the Homeowner” which is a very good overview on fire safety, particularly for folks living in rural areas. His phone number is 541-298-8830.

Your local fire department is also very willing to come out to your home or small farm at no-charge and evaluate your wildfire risk. They can provide you with good ideas and suggestions about how to make your land more defensible and reduce your risk of wildfire damage.

This article is meant to provide small farmers and landowners with some ideas on how to improve fire safety and reduce risks to life and property. As noted, there are a number of good resources available to help homeowners and small farmers in reducing wildfire risks. Your local Fire Departments, the Oregon Department of Forestry and the Washington Department of Natural Resources are all ready and willing to come out and evaluate your property for wildfire risk and make suggestions about how to make your home and small farm more wildfire safe.