

Fire Safety and the Fire Plan: a citizen's perspective

By Stan Nicholson

The Jocko Lake Fire made Seeley Lake citizens very aware of those few weeks when the fate of our forest and homes was in the hands of the weather and the firefighters. In August, the nightly fire information meetings became the center of Seeley Lake life. The remainder of the year is, however, time for citizen education and action; a time to learn how to live in a forest and reduce the risk of fire to homes.

In the decade ending in 2006, 440 new homes were built in the Clearwater Valley. Fortunately they were built in existing neighborhoods, not spread throughout the Valley. Also fortunately, work to provide more fire safety for homes has begun, even though there is still much to do. In this article I will provide a citizen's perspective of what was done in one neighborhood and the fire safety work that is underway more broadly in Seeley Lake.

The Double Arrow Fire Safety Guidelines

When we built our home in 1988, landowners were required to have Double Arrow Landowners' Association approval before removing live trees. In 1996 the regulations were changed to allow the removal of trees less than 6" diameter at breast height without an approved plan. The message changed from "only cut live trees with prior approval" to "manage your forest land and create defensible space* for your house, and we'll help". [*sufficient cleared area around the house for fire fighters to safely defend the structure] An appreciation of the danger from fire prompted that change.

In 1993 the Association received a Department of Natural Resources and Conservation fire risk assessment that identified the upper part of the Ranch as "greatest risk". That report prompted the Board to appoint a task force to draft fire safety guidelines. In 1994 the guidelines were adopted and a Fire Safety Committee was created to implement a fire safety program and enforce the guidelines. So, what has been accomplished over the last 14 years?

Most homeowners have created a defensible space around their homes and many have thinned their entire lots; 150 acres of commons areas and park land have been thinned; roads and bridges have been up-graded; water drafting sites for refilling fire engines have been dug and maintained; emergency exits have been created; and extensive landowner education is underway. In sum, over one half of the 3,200 acre sub division has been thinned to some extent. This work has been recognized with two Keep Montana Green awards. But there is still much to do.

Other neighborhoods have also done fire safety work. The Big Sky Lake homeowners have rebuilt and widened their access road and done substantial roadside thinning. The Eagle Point sub-division had been recently logged before it was developed; Meadows, the golf course lots, were thinned before they were sold and Lake Inez homeowners have done substantial thinning.

Our community is fortunate to have talented loggers, timber managers, truckers and a mill to support and make easier the active management of hundreds of small timbered lots. We are also fortunate to

have federal and state forest management agencies that are thinning their lands adjacent to private homes and cabins.

The Seeley/Swan Fire Plan, March 2004

With a \$25,000 grant from the Forest Service, the six fire fighting agencies from the Seeley and Swan valleys contracted with the Ecosystems Management Research Institute (EMRI) of Seeley Lake to produce a fire plan. The Plan identifies wild fire risks to the communities and outlines an action plan to reduce those risks. Among other things, the Plan opened the door for significant funding administered by the new Fuel Mitigation Task Force, a multi-agency group that provides “one stop shopping” for information and financial assistance for thinning private lots. Since 2004, \$300,000 of federal funds has been distributed. Additional funding is being sought. Applications are available at the Seeley Rural Fire Department.

Post Jocko Fire Activities

The large Jocko Lake fire has prompted the question: “does it make sense for me to thin my lot and create a defensible space if my neighbor does nothing?” Recent experience with large fires provides more evidence that even with fast moving crown fires, properties with an appropriate defensible space can survive. For more on the subject, revisit Jon Haufler’s, *Eye on the Environment*, [Pathfinder](#) 9/13/07 and the Special Supplement 10/11/07.

The answer to the above question is also “yes” in case of the vastly more frequent small fires, most of which are extinguished on first attack [98% according to the Fire Plan]. Thinning as many lots as possible supports the first attack strategy.

Beyond taking care of our own property, we can also participate in the discussion and fire planning in our valley.

- The Clearwater Resource Council holds monthly public meetings that include programs on a wide range of natural resource issues, including fire topics such as fire readiness.
- The Fire Plan calls for a review and an update by no later than 2009. Public input will be sought.
- Fire breaks in the Horseshoe Hills south and east of the Double Arrow Ranch could be considered in the development of a management plan for these 9,000 acres of forest just acquired by the Forest Service.

Prompted by the Jocko fire experience, citizens will be stepping up the pace of thinning their lots. The firewise workshops scheduled for November 9 and 10 are another excellent education opportunity for us. Landowners’ associations and fire agency officials are discussing further steps to be taken to protect the community from fire.

These actions and discussions build upon a decade or more of fire safety and forest management work, adding an important chapter to the story of how citizens who live in a forest can do things to reduce the risk of fire.

Stan Nicholson has been involved with fire safety and forest management issues for about 15 years. He was a Double Arrow Land Owners' Association Board member for ten years, president for eight, and was one of the founders of the Double Arrow's fire safety program. More recently he helped create the Seeley/Swan Fire Plan, was a founding member of the Clearwater Resource Council and he is a member of the Fuel Mitigation Task Force.

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