

The Next Big Fire, Are You Ready?

By Roger Marshall

As I begin to write this Eye on the Environment article, I find it difficult because of the recent tragic loss of 19 Hotshot firefighters battling the Yarnell Fire in Arizona. They made the ultimate sacrifice. May they rest in peace.

Even as that blaze has been contained at nearly 8,400 acres, three new large fires are being reported in Nevada, Idaho and Alaska today. There are currently 17 large fires burning in 8 western states. So far in 2013 there have been 188 large fires and close to 2 million acres burned in the nation. One fire, the Black Forest Fire in Colorado, burned 14,280 acres and destroyed more than 500 structures in just nine days last month. As of June 8th this year, Montana has had 481 fires and 5,336 acres have burned.

I have recently been reading about how the west is experiencing unprecedented “Mega Fires” related to extended drought, extreme winds, high temperatures and heavy accumulations of vegetation which is fuel for fires. It is suggested that some of these burned out areas will likely not recover for centuries, if ever, should our climate continue warming. That is likely if the soil is completely burned away due to intense heating.

So, are you ready for a “Mega Fire” or any fire for that matter? Most of us are probably not. The recent fire of a house on Seeley Lake was a direct result of weather and an unlucky calamity of events. Should our area have been under dry conditions during that fire, it could have spread with potentially devastating results. Fortunately, our local firefighters and the rain helped keep the fire from spreading through the grasses and going out of control.

Most fires are caught early and suppressed. However, sometimes they do get away. Recent Seeley-Swan Fire Plan information shows that in our planning area, for the 5 years between 2003 and 2007, there were 305 fires and 5 of those escaped initial attack and suppression. During the 5 years between 2008 and 2012, there were 309 fires and 16 escaped initial attack and suppression. Just one fire in 2007 escaped initial attack and suppression. That year the Jocko Lakes Fire burned more than 30,000 acres and cost more than \$30 million to put out.

Some people say, “It’s not a matter of if a fire will happen, but when.” Being ready for the when is something we have some control over and can do something about today.

Extreme conditions that intensify fire risk and fire severity can be defined, understood and explained. Some of those extreme conditions in our environment cannot be modified and some can.

Conditions that cannot be modified include topography or slope steepness; red flag weather conditions, with high temperatures, high winds, low humidity; and lightning activity. Conditions that we can modify

are fuel loads near structures; roads with steep grades and heavy fuel loads that prevent fire engine access; and creation of safety or survival zones.

Getting ready for a fire requires each of us to prepare our home which helps our neighborhood be prepared as well. Creating zones of defense around the home is the first best thing to do.

The first zone is to be the most intensively modified with maximum treatment. For 30 feet from your home or structures, keep grasses mowed short. Keep trees at least 30 feet away and tree crowns spaced 10 feet apart and pruned up for 15 feet. Eliminate fuel ladders where continuous vegetation from pine needles, grasses, shrubs, dry and green tree limbs can allow a fire to torch up into the trees crowns. In a wildfire event, your house may be showered with burning embers. Areas with flammable materials that could be ignited by the burning embers need to be eliminated where they come into contact with your house or other buildings. That includes dead pine needles, dry grasses, wood piles, wood chips used for mulching, or even dry coconut door mats; anything likely to catch fire and spread it to your structures.

The second zone extends out to 100 feet from your home and other buildings. Removing dead and dying trees, pruning of tree limbs up to 10 feet, spacing between tree crowns of 10 feet, keeping grasses and shrubs below 8 inches or otherwise in isolated small clumps widely dispersed, and disposing of slash piles is recommended.

Zone 3 reaches out to 200 feet. Maintaining the ecological health and vigor of the forest as well as providing wind, noise, dust, and visual barriers might be particular objectives for this zone. Pruning and managing vegetation overhanging roads is important in this zone and for the entire length of the access road.

All of these distances should be increased for steeper sloped ground.

Creating survivable space around us is possible. Preventing home ignitions in a wildfire is possible.

Additional information about being aware and preparing for wildfires is available in the [Living With Fire Homeowner' Fire Safe Guide for Montana](#) found at the following weblink:

http://www.helenamt.gov/fileadmin/user_upload/City_Fire_Dept/Documents/Living_with_Fire_01.pdf