

WILDFIRE PREPATION

Wildfire, just the word conjures up some sort of demon. Indeed, fire is like a living being creating its own freakish weather patterns and leaving its impish pathway of destruction seeking fuel to consume to stay alive, such fuel can include just about anything, including anyone's house and property.

This fire season, coming out of one of Colorado's driest winters on record, it is important that everyone be fire wise and fire alert, which was one of the reasons for the community Wildfire Preparation mini-seminar put on by the Guffey-based Southern Park County Fire Protection District last Saturday morning, June 2nd, at the fire station in Guffey.

About thirty-five people attended the free wildfire seminar which included speakers Don Felton, SPCFPD fire chief, Dr. Amy Mason, Guffey Vet Clinic and Brian Foltz, Park County Emergency Management Director.

More and more homes are being built in wildfire areas, said Felton and with such dry conditions it is important to prepare you, your family, your home and property and make some sort of plan in case of evacuation because of a fire in your area.

In a wildfire, embers, which can travel a mile or more in front of an approaching fire front, are the main cause of structure fires, but radiant heat (being in close proximity of the fire front) can cause a structure to heat up and catch fire as well.

It is important to access your home and the surrounding area said Felton. What kind of structure do you have, what type of roof do you have, are there adjacent structures and what is the topography (position on the slope, if any, and characteristics of the surrounding area)?

If a fire does come to your area, the fire department will triage structures to protect said Felton, based on how defensible the structures are against a fire with #1 – defensible with little no work, #2 – defensible with some work and #3 – sadly, pass it by.

To make sure your home is not a number three, you need to create a defensible space around your home and prepare said Felton.

Starting with the house, the chimney should have a 1/2" metal screen around the top and be inspected regularly, all roof vents should be covered with 1/8" metal screen, gutters cleaned out, eaves enclosed, crawlspace openings covered, debris cleared off of the roof and any other place embers could get in to cause a fire should be secured and cleaned out.

Debris and furniture should be cleared off of decks, especially the BBQ and propane bottle, as well as cleared out underneath and grasses trimmed. Do not stack firewood on or under the deck and keep it well away from the structure.

Thinking of the landscape said Felton it would be ideal to have gravel, rock, stone and fire resistant plants out three to five feet from the house. From the foundation out to 30 feet, trees need to be limbed up 6-10 feet to eliminate ladder fuels and the litter needs to be cleaned out from underneath them, according to Felton.

From 30' – 100' out from the house one should clear the surface fuel and ladder fuels, yard litter and vehicles. As one goes out from the structure, trees should be thinned from six feet to twelve feet to eighteen feet in between the crowns, said Felton and aspen trees are flame retardant.

Felton went on to explain evacuation procedures and levels of evacuation for Park County. A level one evacuation order is not mandatory and there are no road closures. One usually has from three to five hours before the fire arrives to get ready. It is time to get your animals together and ready, get your contact list and your evacuation plan together, and your valuables.

In a level 2 evacuation, there will be road closures and one usually has from one to three hours before the fire arrives and should look outside and clear items away from the house.

A level three evacuation order, while not mandatory because no one can make you leave your home, it is highly advised. Foltz advised that you should evacuate if you are asked to. At level three evacuation order, there will be road closures and you will have less than an hour before the fire arrives and you should leave immediately. Sometimes if one waits too long it will be impossible to get out.

If the area is safe, the Community Center in Guffey will be set up as an evacuation center according to Felton and the Red Cross already has some supplies stored there.

When you evacuate Felton said, please put a white towel or visible piece of white cloth on your gate or entryway to let emergency services know you are gone and tape a list of contact numbers on the door, as your place will be checked.

If one does decide to shelter in place or you have waited to long and find you cannot evacuate said Felton, YOU ARE ON YOUR OWN. Stay away from windows as they crack in the heat and let in debris and embers flying before the flame front. Close all doors and lock them. Wet towels and rugs and move to the backside of the house away from the flame front. Remember that as hot as it is inside the house, it is five times hotter outside. The car is not a good place to seek shelter, either.

Felton said that re-entry to evacuated areas would not happen until all was safe. Normally only residents are allowed to return and law enforcement and fire vehicles and personnel will be patrolling the area for some time.

Foltz then talked about reverse 911 calls which already automatically go out to all landline phones. The reverse 911 call is only a recording with pertinent information and evacuation routes and is as up to date as possible. Foltz stressed that if conditions outside look dangerous, don't wait for a reverse 911 call, or if the call contradicts what you see outside, don't hesitate, LEAVE.

Foltz said that if one had only a cell phone as a home phone, they need to go to the Park County website and go to Departments, to 911 to CODE RED, and enter their cell phone number and any other numbers because the system will automatically call whatever numbers you list for a reverse 911 call. Landline phone owners can add additional phone numbers to receive a reverse 911 call on this site as well, said Foltz.

Also, said Foltz, one should check on the map to make sure that your house is located in the correct spot and change it if it is not. Finally, call 911 to check and see if you are entered properly in the system. If anyone has any questions or problems with entering their data please call: 719-836-4121, option #5 for a real person, or 791-836-4115, said Foltz.

Mason then talked about animal preparation and evacuation procedures. Each evacuation plan is specific and everyone needs to make their own said Mason.

Mason recommended following the Emergency Planning Workbook, a fifteen page PDF file put out by EquineU.com and the-Horse.com, to make your own plan. The workbook is also available from Mason by email. Even though it is designed for horses one can adapt it to any animal and it is the most comprehensive emergency planning workbook involving animal care that Mason has found.

Before a disaster, one should clean up around the barn and have fire extinguishers in place. Straw is very flammable said Mason.

Get your home and pet first aid kits together and check them yearly. Take a pet first aid class (available in the fall said Mason) and a human CPR class. The fire department offers a monthly CPR class for interested individuals. Call the fire station for more information: 719-689-9479.

Be sure to have a three day to a week's supply of food and water for your animals. Practice loading and unloading animals from trailers before an emergency and make sure each animal has a labeled leather or cotton halter (nylon melts in the heat) easily accessible said Mason.

Make sure dogs are leash trained before an emergency and load and unload animals into carriers with their names on the carrier. Also have collars for your pets with name tags. Pets get freaked out said Mason, so towels to cover their carriers are a good idea. If possible, pictures of your pets to identify them in case they get lost are handy said Mason.

Have all registration and brand papers for your animals before an emergency.

If worse comes to worse, open your pasture gates and corrals and paint your phone number on the side of the animals with florescent paint.

Check your trailers and vehicles before an emergency and park facing out with full tanks of gas. Fill water tanks and then go to the safest location and leave emergency vet and medical contacts. Mason said your evacuation plan can be filed at the vet clinic.

Make a priority list from most important to least important and keep your plan up to date.

The local Guffey Animal Evacuation List was passed around and updated. This list is a phone tree list for local animal owners and interested parties to help each other in times of an evacuation.

Foltz also handed out information on Wildfire and Insurance, put out by the Rocky Mountain Insurance Information Association, www.rmija.org, Evacuating Your Home, put out by the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, 303-692-2730, and the Park County Emergency Preparedness Guide put out by the Park County Office of Emergency Management, www.parkco.us/oem.htm.

Another good resource is Living With Fire put out by the New Mexico forest service, www.nmforestry.com. Also there is information at www.guffeyfire.net about current fire conditions and more. Currently SPCFPD has a burn ban in effect. Contact Mason at amy.mason@guffeyfire.net, for more info on animal evacuations, creating your plan and to get on the animal evacuation list.

A potluck luncheon followed the seminar.

