

Home Wildfire Mitigation – Back to the basics

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As I write this, the Fourmile Canyon fire has been extinguished. It will go down in state history as having the most houses destroyed by wildfire to date. There was nothing special about the day that the fire started. We have had a dry spell and it was a little windy that day. What I would term as a simple accident, turned into one of the most devastating fires in our state.

It has been a while since we have had a major wildfire in the state and even longer since we have had one in our area. We tend to get complacent when the threat is not in the forefront and overlook some of the basics of wildfire mitigation around our homes. There are simple and easy steps that can be taken to help protect your life and property from wildfire.

Keeping gutters clean and free of needles and leaves is critical. Many roofing materials are fire resistant, at least to some degree. Where the problem occurs is when hot embers get into the gutters and set the needles and leaves on fire. Behind the gutters is typically unprotected wood and, once compromised, provides the fire access to the attic space. Cleaning gutters is a simple chore, and the impact of not maintaining them could be the little thing that would cost you your house in a wildfire.

It is important to keep combustibles away from your house, including vegetation, firewood, gas cans, etc. You should maintain a 30 foot cleared perimeter around your house to help prevent ground fires from reaching it. If you have grass around your house, make sure it is kept cut short. If you need to store firewood close to the house for winter, consider waiting until later in the fall before moving it closer than the recommended 30 feet. Between 30 feet and 200 feet, keep wooded areas well thinned with lower branches removed at least 6 feet above the ground. This reduces the severity of crown fires near your house. The farther things that can burn are kept from your house the better the chances of your house surviving a wildfire. It all really boils down to common sense and the risk each homeowner is willing to take.

Can emergency service vehicles access your driveway, and is your address posted where it is visible? Fire trucks keep getting bigger and need more room to maneuver. Driveways should be at least 12 feet wide and clear 12 feet above the surface to facilitate access for today's fire trucks. If you have a long driveway, can the trucks turn around at the end? If you are in doubt, contact your local fire department and ask them to check it.

The other critical piece of the puzzle is to practice basic fire safety. We focus a lot on mitigation strategies but we also need to focus on preventing the fires from happening in the first place. We cannot control nature and things like lightning strikes, but most of the other sources of ignition

that start wildfires can be controlled or prevented. Again, common sense prevails. For instance, choosing not to light a campfire when the fire danger is high- even though there is no burn ban in effect- is a fire-wise decision. It's wise to pay close attention to smoking materials when outside with high fire danger. It's also wise to pay attention to our summer neighbors, who may not be aware of current fire dangers in the area. And with the arrival of fall, as temperatures drop in the evenings, we begin to utilize the fireplaces and wood stoves in our houses. Have you had your chimney cleaned and do you properly dispose of the ashes? Many fires have been started over the years because ashes are thought to be out, and are disposed of in non-fireproof containers. Most wildfires are started by simple mistakes or accidents which are preventable.

As a volunteer firefighter with one of the local departments, Fourmile was my first wildfire. Having completed my basic wildland firefighting training this spring, I never dreamed my first time on a wildfire would be one of this magnitude. My unit's assignment was an easy one compared to what other crews were doing. We patrolled one community that had burned to ensure that the houses that had been spared did not catch fire. As we went house to house, most of what we did was basic mitigation work. There is no easy method to totally protect your house from wildfire but the basics of mitigation and doing the small simple things goes a long way.

As the Emergency Preparedness Coordinator for Gilpin County, one of my responsibilities is to implement a community based approach to wildfire mitigation. It is important for communities to work together in addressing this problem as each community needs are different and your mitigation efforts directly affect your neighbors. As not to recreate the wheel, we are utilizing the National Fire Protection Association's (NFPA) "Firewise Communities" program. This program was developed after the devastating fires in California and other areas in the late 1980s and has been refined over time with lessons learned. It serves as an educational tool and a method of bringing local communities together to implement a planned solution that will benefit all the residents of that community. If you are interesting in exploring becoming a Firewise Community, please contact me at 702-536-2853 or jcrawford@co.gilpin.co.us. The Firewise Communities Web site is www.firewise.org. This site contains a lot of information on protecting your home from wildfire.