

Useful Resources – Be Wise About Wildfire

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In much of the country, it's that time of year again – wildfire season. Temperatures and fuel loads are high, precipitation is low. The Wallow Fire, which as of this writing is now 100% contained, is the largest blaze in Arizona history, burning over 538,000 acres, destroying 32 homes, and costing over \$109 million. Since January, over 33 million acres have burned in the U.S. In Virginia, there have been 636 fires which consumed 11,459 acres and damaged 15 homes since January.



A wildfire in Oregon. Photo by: Dave Powell, USDA Forest Service.

So what can you do to keep your home safe and reduce the chance of ignition from a wildfire? First, stay informed. You can keep track of wildfires nationally using the USDA Forest Service's Incident Information System (INCIWeb) at: <http://www.inciweb.org/>. INCIWeb provides information on where wildfires are located, their status, and the number of acres affected. In Virginia, citizens can use the Daily Report to keep track of local wildfires: <http://www.dof.virginia.gov/fire/sit-rep.htm> (the USDA Forest Service and cooperators, such as the Virginia Department of Forestry (VDOF), are the primary agencies responsible for fighting wildfires).

The National Fire Protection Association's (NFPA) - world's leading advocate of fire prevention - develops, publishes and disseminates more than 300 consensus codes and standards intended to minimize the possibility and effects of fire and other risks. NFPA's mission is to: safely and effectively extinguish fire, when needed; use fire where allowable; manage our natural resources; and, as a Nation, live with wildland fire.

Second, you can take specific steps to protect your home. The USDA Forest Service's National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy takes a three-pronged approach to dealing with wildfires, which involves: maintaining resilient landscapes, creating fire-adapted communities, and wildfire response. The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA; www.nfpa.org), developed the Firewise Communities Program (<http://firewise.org/>) which addresses the second part of this strategy, creating fire-adapted communities.

The Firewise Communities Program teaches homeowners how to adapt to live with wildfire and encourages neighbors to work together to prevent loss. The Firewise quarterly How-to Newsletter,

which is available free from the Firewise website, provides home owners located in regions susceptible to fires with information on how to protect their homes and families in the event of wildfires.

Virginia has also adopted a Firewise strategy. More information on FireWise Virginia is available at: <http://www.dof.virginia.gov/fire/firewise-index.htm>.

FireWise Virginia is part of VDOF's larger Forest Protection Program. The Forest Protection Program seeks to prevent injury or loss of human life, minimize property damage, and protect the forest resource. Wildfire control is part of this mission. One aspect of the wildfire control plan is Virginia's 4 p.m. Burn Law, which is in effect during the spring fire season (February 15 – April 30). During these times, it is unlawful to have an open air fire within 300 feet of woods or dry grass which can carry fire into the woods before 4 p.m. Extra precautions should be taken during the fall fire season (October 15 – November 30) as well.

FireWise Virginia: Free things you can do to protect your home from wildfire

- Perform a FIREWISE assessment of your home.
- Move your firewood pile out of your home's defensible space.
- Clean your roof and gutters of leaves and pine needles (best done in October).
- Clear the view of your house number so it can be easily seen from the street.
- Put a hose (at least 100' long) on a rack and attach it to an outside faucet.
- Trim all tree branches if they overhang your house.
- Trim all tree branches from within 20' of all chimneys.
- Remove trees along the driveway to make it 12' wide.
- Prune branches overhanging the driveway to have 14' overhead clearance.
- Maintain a green lawn for 30' around your home. If new homes are still being built in your area, talk to the developer and local zoning officials about building standards.
- Plan and discuss an escape plan with your family. Include your pets. Have a practice drill.
- Get involved with your community's disaster mitigation plans.
- Check your fire extinguishers. Are they still charged? Are they easy to get to in an emergency? Does everyone in the family know where they are and how to use them?
- Clear deadwood and dense flammable vegetation from your home's defensible space.
- Remove conifer shrubs from your home's defensible space especially if your home is in a high-risk area.
- Review your homeowner's insurance policy for adequate coverage. Consult your insurance agent about costs of rebuilding and repairs in your area.
- Talk to your children about not starting fires or playing with matches.
- Compost leaves in the fall, don't burn them.
- If you burn your brush piles or grass in the spring, get a burning permit.
- Always have a shovel on hand and hook up the garden hose BEFORE you start the fire.
- Never burn if the smoke and flames are blowing towards your home (or your neighbor's home).

For more Firewise tips, visit <http://www.dof.virginia.gov/fire/firewise-index.htm>

To determine if your property is at risk, take the quiz:

<http://www.dof.virginia.gov/fire/firewise-hazard-test.shtml>

Another useful resource from the University of Florida: Wildfire Risk Assessment for Homeowners in the Southern United States:

<http://www.bugwood.org/acrobat/WildfireRAGH.pdf>