

Wildfire Preparedness: The Five Aspects of Readiness

A classic 70's tune gives us the lyrics, "She ran calling 'Wildfire'...." Then a love song, but today, possibly the beginnings of an action / adventure / horror movie. With rainfall low, and temperatures and winds high, the wildfires we're currently battling across the country are heavily taxing our first responder assets. More fires will surely follow if these conditions continue.

First responder assets aside, these fires have affected local civilians. Thousands have evacuated, and many find nothing but charred vacant lots when they return. What are some innovative ways civilians can protect themselves, their property, and actually help firefighters in the process?

At the household level, most of us have smoke detectors. That's good, because in a house fire, as in a wildfire, where there's smoke, there's **F.L.A.M.E.:**

Family – Something as massive as a wildfire will affect your whole family. Prepare them now.

Landscaping – Simple and subtle steps can make your property much more fire resistant.

Awareness – In an emergency, time is crucial. Stay aware of the threat and get the warnings early.

Moisture – Some say you fight fire with fire. We say you fight fire with water.

Evacuation – Even after taking all the other steps, a wildfire is something best avoided.

Family

A prepared and involved family is far more able to handle any type of disaster than those who wait for last-minute instruction. Therefore, one of the best things you can do for your family is to prepare them for one of the most common and least forgiving enemies; fire.

1. Take the family on a fire-safety tour through the house. Locate dangers such as overloaded electrical outlets and safety items such as extinguishers and escape routes.
2. In emergencies, redundancy is our friend. You should have more than one smoke detector, fire extinguisher, and escape route from rooms or the house. Hint: If you're a heavy sleeper, buy a "baby monitor." Put the transmitter near the farthest smoke detector and the receiver in your bedroom.
3. Make sure everyone in the family knows how to use a fire extinguisher, and how to call 911.
4. Have regular fire drills. Let each family member have a turn being the one who discovers the fire and who has to warn others. On at least every other drill, have everyone evacuate blind-folded on their hands and knees (while exercising due safety) to mimic the realistic conditions of a fire evacuation.
5. Revisit every family emergency plan with the whole family during wildfire season and certainly if one is in your area and possibly heading your way.

Landscaping

Though tragedies usually take the lead in newscasts, stories still abound of how some homeowners managed to protect their properties from wildfire by simple and subtle changes with their landscaping and home. Take these steps now, since in a fire, time is of the essence.

1. Your main landscaping consideration is to remove any dead, dry vegetation, whether on the ground or in your trees, that could transfer fire to your house. Since this aspect of wildfire preparedness has been adequately covered by others, here are a few good outside sources:
 - General wildfire landscaping tips: <http://www.firewise.org/resources/files/wildfr2.pdf> .
 - Florida wildfire landscaping pointers: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/FR/FR07600.pdf> .
 - More on landscaping during wildfire season: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/FR/FR04700.pdf>.
 - Fire-resistant plants: http://web1.msue.msu.edu/emergency/pubs/wildfire_resistant.pdf.
2. Be ready to seal your house before evacuating. Create covers for any opening on your home such as attic vents (roof turbines can be covered with metal trash cans), crawlspace openings, etc. Gather your material (such as plywood) and cut, paint, and label (where it goes) each cover now, keeping them stored on your property for immediate use. Put a couple of hooks over each opening you might cover and drill corresponding holes in the plywood covers. The hooks will hold the cover in place while you drill in the screws. This allows one person to do the job and frees up others to perform

other necessary tasks. Hint: Also make covers for your windows (including garage door windows) just as if you lived in a hurricane zone.

3. Create a “fire tool box” and include everything needed to prep your house in advance of a wildfire. Store extra garden hoses, water sprinklers, “Y” connectors for extra hoses, wrenches to turn off your gas, rolls of heavy-duty aluminum foil (to cover the openings you didn’t make covers for), machetes and gloves for last minute brush clearing, etc. Store extra tools because you won’t have time to replace tools that might have been broken or lost.
4. Make sure first responders can see your home’s address. Put your house number on your mailbox, near your front door, and painted on the curb by your driveway.

Awareness

A common theme in all our publications and presentations is the fact that in an emergency, our most crucial asset is time (see our other articles at www.disasterprep101.com). The two key elements of time in a wildfire are one, to have as much done in advance as possible, and two, get as early a warning as possible.

1. Don’t wait for a wildfire to approach to start your landscaping. Perform that now and keep your property as fire-retardant as you can.
2. Don’t wait for the smell of smoke to warn you a fire is on its way. If fire conditions are right, monitor news channels and listen for community warnings.
3. Learn to recognize your community warnings. Does your community have a reverse 911 system? Sirens? Will the local TV or radio station broadcast the alert? If your community doesn’t have any of these systems, why not start them in your neighborhood? At the very least, have a phone tree.
4. Buy an NOAA Weather Alert Radio since they’re being incorporated into the overall Emergency Alert System. You should also know who your local Ham Radio operators are. See <http://www.arrl.org>.

Moisture

Water is the king of firefighting and fire suppression substances. The best protection for your property lies in your ability to keep a “dome” of moisture in one form or another all over and around your home.

1. One publication under “landscaping” above lists beneficial plants that hold their moisture well. Regardless of the types of plant life in your yard, keep them well hydrated (while following watering ordinances).
2. When setting up your sprinklers, give your yard adequate spray coverage, especially over areas that might worsen the fire such as an above-ground propane tank or wooden deck attached to your house. The best sprinkler for surface areas is the professional directional type rather than the small garden variety that only sprays a weak pattern over a small area. Your garden store rep can help.
3. Put sprinklers on your roof, being sure to anchor them in place since the high winds generated in some wildfire wind storms can blow them off the roof.
4. If you have an in-ground sprinkler system, great! It will give you even water coverage over the grounds and provide a good foundation for the comprehensive water system you’ll need. To your in-ground system add separate “fire” lines that feed water to sprinklers that either spray directly against your house, or outward from your yard to cover vegetation surrounding your property. Too, have a sprinkler line permanently installed on your roof to save you the time of manually putting sprinklers up there. Also, install an additional input valve to allow water from a secondary source like a water pump drawing from your swimming pool.
5. If you have a pool, pond, well, or creek, you have a reservoir that should be put to good use so you don’t draw off the municipal water firefighters need to prevent fire from nearing your property in the first place. It’s a simple matter to keep a gas-powered generator (which self-reliant families should have) and a water pump (such as a pressure-washer), and use the two to draw water from your pool and feed it to your sprinklers. If you have a well with an electric pump, hook your generator to the pump to keep it running should local power fail. Exercise caution when setting up your generator so it doesn’t start its own fire.
6. A final consideration with sprinklers is position. Cover the outer perimeter of your yard, spray against the outer walls and roof of your house, and cover the crowns of your trees if possible. Also, consider outward-pointing sprinklers anchored to an elevated position such as an upper floor deck or porch, or your roof.

Evacuation

We strongly recommend evacuation, even if you've taken all the above steps and feel they might work. It's best that you be pre-prepped and ready to leave at a moment's notice since time is our most valuable asset. The more ready you are in advance, the more time you have.

1. All your landscaping steps should be taken care of now and maintained, especially during fire season.
2. In wildfire-prone areas, and especially during wildfire season, keep your bugout kits and vehicle ready at all times (with fuel tanks topped off). Hint: With your documents, keep the non-emergency numbers for local authorities so you can call afterward to find out when it's safe to return.
3. Perform last-minute landscaping ONLY if time allows, since you'll want extra time to perform the household shutdown steps. However, don't do anything until you've loaded your car with provisions and have nothing left to load but people and pets (in their carriers and/or ready to go).
4. Inside the house do the following:
 - Move all flammables (such as furniture and curtains) away from windows making sure each is closed and latched. Lower and close any metallic blinds.
 - Leave your fireplace damper open, and close the fireplace protective cover.
 - Close all interior doors but don't lock them.
 - Turn off your heat/AC system, and cover any window air-conditioners or floor heater vents with aluminum foil and duct tape inside and out.
 - Turn off all gas coming into the house whether from underground line or above-ground tank.
 - Turn on inside and outside lights so your property is visible in heavy smoke. Firefighters may need to use it as a beacon.
5. To protect the valuables you don't have room for in your evacuation vehicle, consider these:
 - For waterproof valuables, put them in a bathtub, storage tub, or trashcan you've filled with water. (Notice we didn't recommend your pool, since you should be using it to feed your sprinklers.)
 - Large valuables such as antique furniture, etc. should be carried into the center of the house on the lowest floor (the same place you'd go in a tornado).
 - Major appliances, such as your oven, fridge, freezer, dishwasher, clothes washer, and dryer, tend not to be readily consumed by flame or crushed by debris and thereby offer a possible protected storage location for other valuables. Hint: Disposable diapers are surprisingly flame resistant, and might be useful as wraps for some items stored in an appliance.
6. Lock up the house, turn on outside lights, leave a note on the door telling authorities you've evacuated, check with neighbors to make sure they're on their way to safety, hop in your vehicle, and leave. Hint: If the area is getting smoky, listen to your radio for road closure information, turn your headlights on low, and set your climate controls to "re-circulate" so as not to draw in smoke from outside the vehicle.

Naturally, this is an article that could go for a few dozen more pages since it's such an important topic and certainly one where we could offer extensive detail. For now, this will have to do. Will the above information make you fireproof and prevent any damage to your property? No. But it's very likely to help, especially if you take these steps now. Taking these measures also helps firefighters since any time a wildfire is delayed or a home protected, you take one more item off the shoulders of first responders. Prep now, stay safe, and remember that preparedness is not only a social responsibility; it's your only true protection.

Copyright 2007, Paul Purcell. About the author: Paul Purcell is an Atlanta-based security analyst and preparedness consultant with over twenty years risk management and preparedness experience. He's also the author of **Disaster Prep 101** found at www.disasterprep101.com, and he's a partner / advisor to 1-800-PREPARE found at www.1800PREPARE.com.

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