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May is Wildfire Awareness Month – Let's Get Prepared Together with Firewise

With one of the wettest springs on record in the Pacific Northwest, you might be surprised to hear about wildfire right now. We're only now just emerging into the warmer temperatures and longer days of spring, but it's worth having the conversation… and why? Preparedness. Seattle Seahawks' Russell Wilson said it best when he shared, "The separation is in the preparation." Although his quote may be for the football field in his case, if we apply the same mentality to our own "fields," our homes and landscapes, with wildfire, we can be better prepared going into summer. There is no better time than the present to prepare for wildfire on Whidbey.

The thought of wildfire may often be reserved for the dry, hot summers or perhaps many might venture east of the mountains, thinking of those who they know and care for that experienced in some way the damages wrought by the wildfires in years previous in our eastern counties. Here's the thing –wildfire is based not just on geography – but rather, a set of specific conditions that can be applied anywhere in our state, including Whidbey Island, which influences wildfire risk.

Key factors that influence wildfire behavior:

- Topography (lay of the land affects the rate of intensity and spread)
- Weather (wind speed, relative humidity and ambient temperature)
- Fuel (vegetation and man-made structures)

Topography, weather, and fuel are the key factors that influence wildfire behavior. Of those three, fuel is what homeowners can influence and prepare for now. Extreme wildfire incidents occur when extreme weather conditions are also present – extended drought, high winds, low humidity, and high temperatures. Mix these extreme conditions with excess fuel build-up – live and dead vegetation from trees and shrubs, as well as increasing the number of homes and structures built adjacent to contiguous forestland – and you have a recipe for increased wildfire risk, even here on Whidbey.

We may not be able to change our topography or weather, but we can change our homes and landscapes to be more fire-wise! And to help us, did you know May is Wildfire Awareness Month? Governors of the eight western states – Oregon, Washington, Nevada, California, Idaho, Utah, Montana, and South Dakota – recently signed a proclamation recognizing May as Wildfire Awareness Month. It's important! A month dedicated for Washington's residents to plan ahead.

There's a lot at stake in a wildfire event – lives, properties, forestlands. On Whidbey Island, our conditions are such that most often it will not actually be the major wildfire events we so often associate with eastern Washington affecting us, but rather, embers from smaller wildfire incidents that could pose the biggest threat. So what can you do to be more ember aware and prepare for wildfire this month? Below are a few tips to get you started, and you'll notice many of them are simple things that, if we all commit to doing, can greatly reduce our collective risk and help out our local and regional firefighters.

Tips to reduce your wildfire risk this season:

- Remove dead, overhanging branches from your property
- Clean your roofs and gutters to remove all debris accumulation
- Water your lawn regularly – if it's brown, water it down so it won't ignite
- Prune your plants and ensure debris is removed
- Replace wood mulches with non-combustible types
- Choose fire-resistant native plants with less resins, oils, and waxes to use in landscaping
- Remove wood piles and other easily ignitable materials from under decks

Whidbey Island Conservation District, in partnership with the Central Whidbey Island Fire and Rescue District, and the Washington Department of Natural Resources have launched the Firewise Program in central Whidbey, which provides resources and support to Whidbey's residents through outreach and education. The program is funded this year through the Washington State Conservation Commission. Firewise is a nationally recognized homeowner preparedness program that's been around since 2002 and has over 1,200 communities nationwide that have joined. In 2016, Washington state took the lead with new communities joining.

The Firewise Program empowers and equips homeowners with resources and support to work collaboratively to protect homes and properties from wildfire. Communities can apply to become nationally-recognized Firewise Communities through a five-step process that involves the formation of a Firewise board, community wildfire assessment with local fire experts, a Firewise education day for homeowners, and investment in volunteer hours or money to help with wildfire mitigation work on community or home properties.

Want to take advantage of the great wildfire preparedness resources here on Whidbey? Check out www.whidbeycd.org/firewise/ or contact the Whidbey Island Conservation District at (888) 678-4922 to learn more. As part of Firewise, homeowners can sign-up to receive free, one-hour home assessments with local fire experts. To learn more and to sign-up, visit www.whidbeycd.org/firewise-home-assessment/. WICD and its partners are also interested in working with groups of homeowners on community wildfire assessments, and are reaching out to many homeowner communities now to share with them these resources.

Join us to learn more about what you can do and the resources available to you through partnering organizations and agencies at the first ever Whidbey Island Firewise Day Sat., May 20 from 10 a.m. – 2 p.m., Race Road Fire Station, 1164 Race Rd., Coupeville, WA. To learn more, visit www.whidbeycd.org/firewise. As part of this energizing event, we'll be hosting Gary Marshall, a national Firewise speaker through the National Fire Protection Agency who will equip us with knowledge about ember awareness. Additionally, there will be booths with resources from local fire experts representing the Central Whidbey Island Fire and Rescue, Washington Department of Natural Resources, WSU Extension Forestry, Whidbey Island Conservation District, Whidbey Camano Land Trust, and the Island County Department of Emergency Management. Fire engine tours, refreshments, and an afternoon talk and guided walk showcasing forest health and Firewise practices for landowners will also be part of the schedule. We hope to see you there as we team together to make Whidbey more fire-wise!

PHONE: (360)682-2341 FAX: (360)682-2344
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390 NE MIDWAY BLVD | PO BOX 1098 | OAK HARBOR, WASHINGTON 98277

Publisher & Editor ..... Eric Marshall
Marketing Representatives ..... Penny Hill, Roosevelt Rumble
Graphic Design ..... Teresa Besaw
Production Manager ..... TJ Pierzchala
Circulation Manager ..... Jon Wynn

Contributing Writers
Jim Freeman
Wesley Hallock
Kae Harris
Tracy Loescher
Kathy Reed
Carey Ross

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