

Make a Difference

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FIREWISE DURING THE FOURTH OF JULY – ARE YOU “EMBER AWARE” AND PREPARED?

Summer is here. It arrived just last week. Literally, I noticed its arrival on the official summer solstice – June 20. Not one day too early, nor one day too late. Finally! It truly feels like summer.

I'm sure the increasing frequency of blue skies and sun rays are welcomed by many of us. Although, I must say, I've heard more wishes for temperatures to stay cool in this past week than I have in the past six months. Our desire for a mild climate, even in the “heat of summer,” is a testament to what Whidbey Islanders are all about! As thankful as I am that I don't have to turn on my drip irrigation just yet – relying instead on the lingering moisture in the ground – I'm also equally grateful for the opportunity to get outside after work as light extends late into evening hours. Instead of clapping my regular hot latte, I think I'll have it iced this time.

On Whidbey Island, summer engulfs our pocket of paradise like the way tidal waves fall upon shore. You can feel the hustle and bustle of walkers and drivers-by. Hear the echo of glasses chiming and laughter cascading out of local restaurants. Smell the strong scent of a salty sea breeze at low tide. Touch the cotyledon leaf as your newest vegetables emerge from the garden. Taste the sweet strawberries from your local farm.

Relaxation equals summer. Summer equals relaxation, right? That's Whidbey's signature theme, especially to our off-island visitors. This summer, it's also an opportunity for us locals to be prepared going into our hottest, driest season – a season where wildfire ignition potential increases. This summer, relaxation and wildfire preparation can go hand-in-hand. As a homeowner, wouldn't it be nice to kick your feet up and relax fully, in all sense of the word, knowing you are more aware and prepared for the fire season? The Firewise Communities Program provides you with the expertise, resources, and support to do just that.

The Whidbey Island Conservation District (WICD), in partnership with the Central Whidbey Fire and Rescue District (CWIFR) and Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR) spent the past year piloting Firewise, a nationally-recognized outreach and education program, to Central Whidbey

residents. With funding from the Washington State Conservation Commission, Firewise empowers residents to work collaboratively to take proactive steps to protect their homes from wildfire. Central Whidbey was selected as the pilot area for the program on Whidbey due to the influence of the rain shadow, resulting in low rainfall in the summer months. Resources and support are available to residents island-wide, however, and partnerships with the North Whidbey Fire and Rescue District are growing as a result of homeowner interest expanding to other areas of the island.

Firewise provides residents with the opportunity to work collaboratively with local conservation districts, fire departments, and the DNR to learn about and create defensible space around their homes and properties – an asset to both homeowners and local fire-fighting resources during the wildfire season.

Many may recall two summers ago, in July 2015, when staff from four fire agencies responded to a 10-acre brushfire on a steep bluff at Fort Ebey State Park in central Whidbey. The fire was contained in part due to effective collaboration between fire agencies and local community members, and nearby campgrounds and forestlands were spared as a result. However, the event was a local reminder that given extreme weather conditions with excess fuel build-up and steep slopes, wildfire risk is still very much present on Whidbey.

Firewise emphasizes collaboration where homeowners learn about the science behind wildfire and are provided with resources about how to become the “fire break” in the event a wildfire should occur. With support from local fire experts, Firewise communities connect, learn, plan, act, and can become recognized nationally for their efforts in adapting to living with wildfire in their communities.

What influences wildfire behavior in a given area? Three main factors: Fuel, Weather, and Topography.

Most of us may think first of our neighbors in eastern Washington when I say “wildfire.” But we must remember, wildfire is a natural function in any ecological region, and isn't necessarily based solely on your geography. On Whidbey Island, communities tucked within forested areas along the dry bluff zones receive prevailing west winds in summer and are more at risk. Thankfully, you most likely will not see any “thousand acre fire” events taking place on Whidbey, due to our higher humidity and coarser, fire-resistant vegetation, such as the Douglas Fir trees that dominate our forests, but it doesn't mean Whidbey's completely immune to wildfire risk either. What we might see, instead, is smaller, surface fires resulting from a combination of high temperatures, low humidity, a buildup of light, flashy fuels like tall grass or deadened surface and ground vegetation with no separation, and strong westerly winds off the Strait of Juan de Fuca. All the more reason, this Fourth of July, to be “ember aware” and Firewise.

This celebratory time of year is the perfect time to not just prepare your homes and properties for wildfires, but to practice responsible purchasing and discharging of fireworks. Be very careful, especially, with fireworks if you're near dry, grassy fields or by a bluff or beach property with steep slopes and homes nearby.

The Island County Sheriff's Department serves as the Fire Marshall for Island County and communicates the allowable types and times fireworks can be purchased and discharged in the various regions of Whidbey and Camano Islands. To learn more about the times you can discharge fireworks, contact the Island County Sheriff's Office and visit www.islandcountywa.gov/Pages/AllNewsAndAnnouncements.aspx?news=79. Your fellow community members who live in those forested areas along the dry, bluff zones of our island will thank you in advance for knowing and following those rules as a precaution to keeping homes and properties safe.

For a homeowner who wishes to prepare themselves going into the dry summer season, fire experts often say the little things around your home can be the biggest deal breakers when it comes to wildfire risk. So, even the smallest, simplest of changes can pay big dividends when it comes to reducing your risk. Should a wildfire ever approach your home and property, imagine three zones of defense encircling it, three opportunities to be the “fire break.” This “Home Ignition Zone” is your way, as a homeowner, to manage your landscape so fire is slowed and goes out. The three zones are as follows and include the home structure and its immediate surroundings:

Zone 1: 0 – 5 feet from home
Zone 2: 5 – 30 feet from home
Zone 3: 30 – 100 feet+ from home

Most of us live on properties that may have only one or, at most, two zones of defense. Firewise emphasizes the importance of working with neighbors to practice Firewise together to be most effective. Your ultimate goal, should a wildfire occur, is to have your property and home be the “fire break.” You have the opportunity to adapt your landscape in such a way to work with, instead of against, the natural fire regime, and keep the approaching flames “low and slow,” instead of “high and dry” and finally “OUT” by the time it reaches your home. That's Firewise.

Below are some key Firewise tips, organized by the Home Ignition Zone, we all can practice this Fourth of July to make our community safer and are relevant to Whidbey's unique wildfire regime:

Start in Zone 1 (0 – 5 feet):

Work on protecting the most vulnerable parts of your home structure, such as the attic, soffit vents, and crawl spaces, by placing 1/8 inch or smaller wire or metal mesh screen covers over them to reduce the likeliness of embers or firebrands entering your home.

Inspect your windows and skylights. During a wildfire event, ensure they are closed so there is no opening into your home for a wildfire to enter. Glass windows are more durable than plastic, and double-paned is often more effective than single-paned window glass.

Remove dry debris accumulation, such as leaf litter and needles, from your “nooks and crannies” along the roofs, gutters, foundation, and under decks and crawl spaces.

Consider hardscaping using rocks, gravel, or stone in place of mulch.

Move into Zone 2 (5 – 30 feet):

Consider regular landscape maintenance, including mowing your grass regularly and leaving the clippings to keep moisture in the ground.

Prune landscape plants which may be touching the home.

Choose native plants, which are often more drought-tolerant and fire-resistant than ornamentals, to install the next time you purchase plants.

Expand to Zone 3 (30 – 100 feet):

Create separation between your surface fuels (shrubby vegetation) and ladder fuels (trees). No need to clear the forest, but rather, focus instead on keeping your native vegetation intact, removing invasive species when you're able, and emphasize creating vertical separation so your ground vegetation is not directly touching your ladder vegetation.

Resources, expertise, and support are available to Whidbey Island residents through the Firewise Program. To learn more, visit www.whidbeycd.org/firewise or contact the Whidbey Island Conservation District at (888) 678-4922.



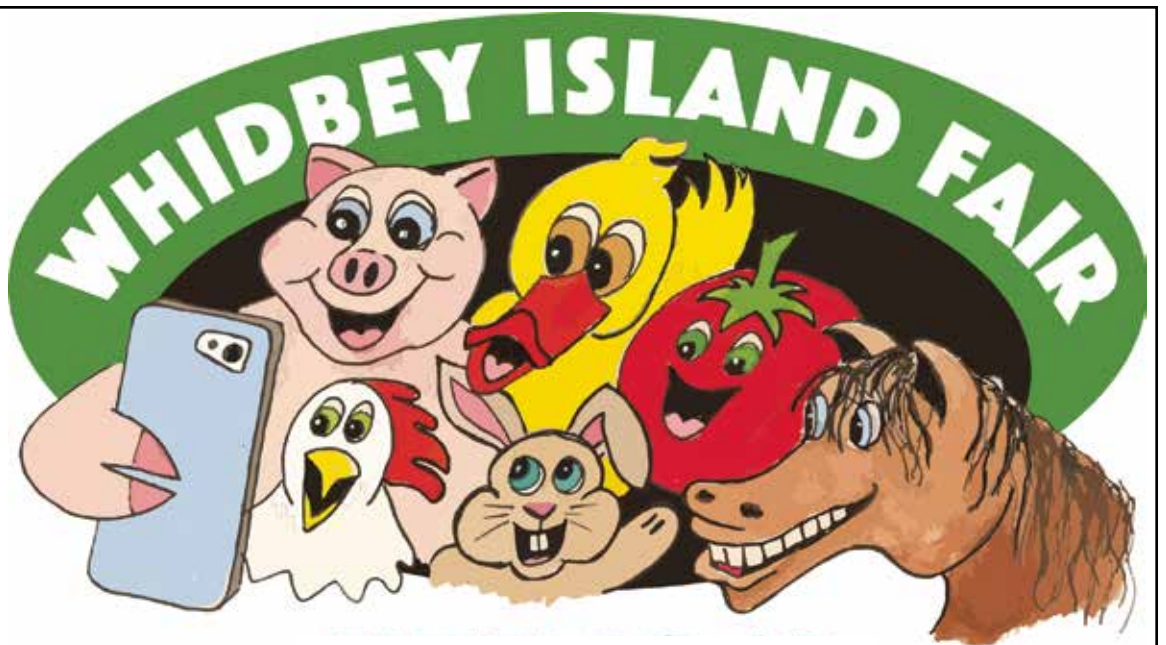
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