



THE WILDFIRE CHALLENGE AND WHAT YOU CAN DO

Wildfire. In recent years, we've seen more evidence of it with smoky summer skies, its presence known and announced with frequency by newscasters and neighbors alike. Wildfire is a natural process, but which knows no boundaries. Wildfire ignition is based on a clear set of conditions – the right fuel types, weather conditions, & topography – and, if aligned just right, doesn't matter if your geography is eastern Washington or Whidbey Island. Wildfire, it can happen anywhere.

Wildfire is on our minds as we approach summer. This collective challenge we face – is increased wildfire frequency the result of climate change? Failed forest management policy? Increased development in the Wildland Urban Interface – the zone of transition between wildland and human development? The complex wildfire challenge cannot be blamed on one, two, or three separate issues alone. Wildfires are complex, naturally occurring events, that have always occurred across the landscape. Only in the last century have wildfires really started to upset the ways we humans live.

As long as there are forests, lightning, and humans on the landscape, there will be wildfires. It is important for us to do what we can to prevent wildfires from starting, especially in the height of the hot and dry summer season. But we also need to be better prepared for when wildfires do start.

Did you know? Extremely large, forest stand replacing wildfires have occurred for thousands of years across western Washington, including Whidbey Island. Luckily we have dedicated fire suppression crews and technology able to quickly respond to fires in today's environment.

What can you do about it? May in Washington State is "Wildfire Awareness Month" and should act as a reminder for individuals to think about their exposure to wildfire. Does your property have contiguous fuels (grass, brush, trees, leaves, and pine needles) adjacent to your home? Most of our homes do, which is why it's important to understand exposure to wildfires and the associated risk you live with each year.

How are firefighters trained to protect homes in the Wildland Urban Interface? The National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) provides guidance to wildland fire-

fighters regarding the triaging of structures, in the event of a wildfire emergency. Often, when fires are actively burning out-of-control in the wildland, firefighters are forced to make decisions about which structures they can safely save or commit fire suppression resources to.

The first two triage categories firefighters use to determine is a structure is defensible is (1) "standalone" or (2) rep and hold. Both structure category types must have a safety zone present – an area safe for firefighters to take refuge from an approaching fire.

Standalone structures are not likely to ignite during initial fire front contact. In other words, these structures are built with fire resistant materials and have good defensible space around the structures without a lot of vegetation or other flammable debris.

Prep and hold structures are those that could use some on-site preparation, but in general have few tactical challenges.

The other two triage categories for structures are non-defensible because they lack a safety zone on-site. These structures would be either (1) prep and leave or (2) rescue drive-by.

Prep and leave structures are those that have some tactical challenges, but if time allows, rapid mitigation measures may be performed before firefighters are forced to retreat.

Rescue drive-by structures have significant tactical challenges and firefighters would only check to ensure people are not present in the threatened structure before retreating to safety.

What type of home do you want to have? With the increasing reality of a wildfire spreading through areas with homes, both in eastern Washington and western

Washington, nobody wants their home to be a "rescue drive-by." Initial response fire suppression agencies may be overwhelmed and forced to triage their efforts in order to best protect all properties and provide for public and firefighter safety. The biggest tactical challenge firefighters face is how much time they have to prepare a structure. Sometimes time critical decisions have to be made as to where they allocate resources.

That being said, here are the top three things homeowners can implement and maintain to help in protecting their homes in the event of a wildfire:

- Maintain adequate defensible space around your "home ignition zone" (For detailed information about what this means, visit www.nfpa.org/Public-Education/By-topic/Wildfire/Preparing-homes-for-wildfire).
- Construct and maintain your driveways with highly visible address signage to accommodate large fire response vehicles. A great rule of thumb is to make sure trees, limbs, and other brush are cleared at least 13 feet wide by 13 feet high along driveway corridors.
- Construct and maintain adequate turn-arounds for large emergency medical and fire response vehicles to use at the end of your driveways.

These efforts are fairly easy to implement, and will make your property much more defensible in the event of a wildfire. If each of us worked to adapt our landscapes to living with wildfire, we'd be well positioned in the era of the wildfire challenge to protect our homes, properties, and communities.

During Healthcare Week from May 12 to 18, we recognize and celebrate our entire team for their dedicated service to our community.

Thank you, All!



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Housekeepers ■ Managers ■ Nurses ■ Paramedics ■ Pharmacists ■ Physicians
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