

Fire Safety

Fire: Nature's Creative Force

We all know that change is a fact of life. For North American forest and rangelands, change comes in the form of fire. After thousands of years of living with natural disturbances, many plant and wildlife species in the Northern Rocky Mountains have come to depend on its periodic presence in the ecosystem to create the conditions they need to flourish. Without fire, many ecosystems become stagnant and lose their diversity of life.

For more than 80 years, land management agencies have tried to eliminate the "evil" of fire from forested lands. In many cases, they've protected the trees, but at the expense of the forest community. Years of study show that the exclusion of fire from the ecosystem is creating unhealthy, overcrowded forests that contain more fuel for larger, more severe fires. Often these larger, more intense fires result in more significant impacts to water, soil and air resources than a managed, prescribed fire.

As the American public understands that fire in the ecosystem is a natural and revitalizing process, it must also accept that the return of fire to the landscape is not without consequence. There may be hazy skies, and patches of blackened forest, and there's the risk of a fire becoming too large, but these realities must be accepted if Northern Rocky Mountain ecosystems are to retain their ecological balance.

Lightning strikes are an historic and leading cause of wildfire. Thousands of lightning-caused ignitions are reported annually on the nation's forest lands.

For years, the accepted story about fire was that it destroyed forests. The reality is: fire is essential to forest health. In the Northern Rocky Mountains, research shows that many ecosystems depend on fire to renew the landscape by releasing nutrients and stimulating new life. In time, fire creates a healthy diversity of plant and wildlife species, which benefits hiker and hunter alike.

Pre-Fire Activities, Defensible Land

It is not a questions of "if" wildfires will occur, rather, "when" they will occur, and the likelihood of human injury and fatality, and property loss is great and increasing. Our ability to live more safely in this fire environment greatly depends upon our use of "pre-fire activities." Pre-fire activities include proper vegetation management around the home (known as defensible space), use of fire resistant building materials, appropriate subdivision design, and management action, such as mechanical treatment and prescribed fires. Research clearly demonstrates that pre-fire activities save lives and property.

Defensible Space is the area between a house and an oncoming wildfire. In this space, the vegetation has been modified to reduce the wildfire threat and to provide an opportunity for firefighters to effectively defend the house. This term describes vegetation management practices aimed at reducing the wildfire threat to homes.

Defensible space practices include:

- Increasing the moisture content of vegetation
- Decreasing the amount of flammable vegetation
- Shortening plant height
- Altering the arrangement of plants

The Three R's of Defensible Space:

REMOVAL: This technique involves the elimination of entire plants, particularly trees and shrubs, from the site. Examples of removal are cutting down a dead tree or cutting out flammable shrubs.

REDUCTION: The removal of plant parts, such as branches or leaves, constitutes reduction. Examples of reduction are pruning dead wood from a shrub, removing low tree branches, and mowing dried grass.

REPLACEMENT: Replacement is substituting less flammable plants for more hazardous vegetation. Removal of a dense stand of flammable shrubs and planting an irrigated, well maintained flowerbed is an example of replacement.

For more information concerning Defensible Space and fire prevention, call your local land management agencies and fire departments, and visit these websites:

BLM

<http://www.blm.gov>

Colorado State Forest Services

<http://lamar.colostate.edu/~firewise>

FEMA

<http://www.fema.gov/reg-viii>

Fire Safe Council

<http://www.firesafecouncil.org>

Firewise

<http://www.firewise.org>

National Interagency Fire Center

<http://www.nifc.gov>

Smokey Bear

<http://www.smokeybear.com>

USFS Rocky Mountain Region

<http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/fire/rmacc.html>

Outdoor Fire Safety

(See Resource Guide, Emergency Services.)

- Use fire resistant building materials for your home or other structures.
- Burn safely: obtain permits, check the weather, consider alternatives to burning, don't pile it on the ground - use a safe receptacle, never burn aerosol cans, be prepared with fire extinguishing tools and water.
- Clean your roof.
- Keep your chimney clean.
- Store firewood away from your home.
- Use only approved wood burning devices.
- Install a spark arrester: All types of equipment and vehicles are required to have spark arresters: chain saws, portable generators, cross county vehicles, and trail bikes, to name a few, require spark arresters if used in or near grass, brush or a wooded area. Install a spark arrester on the chimney of your home.
- Control vegetation.
- Develop a water supply.
- Plan adequate access and escape.
- Have fire tools handy.
- Cool lanterns, stoves and heaters before refueling. Place them in a cleared area to fill

them. Never light them inside a tent, trailer or camper. Be sure to have adequate ventilation. Recap and store flammable liquid containers in a safe place.

- Safe smoking practices require at least a 3 foot clearing around the smoker. Grind out your cigarette in the dirt, never on a log or stump. It is unsafe to smoke while walking or riding a horse or trail bike. Use your ashtray while in your car.
- Charcoal Briquets: Dunk them, don't sprinkle. Soak with water, stir and soak again. Feel the coal with bare hands to be sure.
- Campfires: Build away from overhanging branches, steep slopes, rotten stumps, logs, dry grass and leaves. Have plenty of water on hand. Keep campfires small. Never leave a campfire unattended. To put out: Drown the fire with water, stir the remains, add more water, stir again, then feel with your bare hands.

Additional Sources of Information

U.S.D.A. Forest Service & U.S.D.I. Bureau of Land Management, Saguache Field Office
719 655-2547

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