

Complacency is a wildfire's friend

by Jeff Richardson

Every year, all wildland firefighters are required to take an eight hour fireline safety refresher course. A key element of this annual training is a review of recent fires in the United States where burn-overs, shelter deployments, accidents, injuries or fatalities have occurred.

There are safety professionals in the fire service who study these incidents in an effort to find the causes, identify unsafe work practices and trends, and recommend corrective solutions. They have determined there are four major common denominators of fire behavior on tragedy (fatal and near-fatal) wildland fires. Such fires often occur:

- On relatively small fires or deceptively quiet areas of large fires,
- In relatively light fuels, such as grass, herbs and light brush,
- When there is an unexpected shift in wind direction or wind speed,
- When fire responds to topographic conditions and runs uphill.

Another common denominator of tragedy fires is complacency. We firefighters and fire managers have learned again and again, that we cannot afford to let our guards down. We know that fire can and often does behave erratically. We know that fires can blow up and run with little or no warning, even after an extended period of minimal or subdued fire behavior. And we know local winds are often unpredictable and shifts can occur abruptly. On a hot day, working hard, and under pressure to accomplish assigned tasks, a firefighter must make the extra effort to maintain good situational awareness and sense trouble before it's too late.

Complacency is not just an issue for firefighters; it is an issue for anyone whose private property may lie in the path of an approaching wildfire. It's just as important for homeowners to maintain good situational awareness as it is for firefighters. If you live in the wildland-urban interface in a fire-prone ecosystem, sooner or later you're going to have to deal with fire.

Just as firefighters prepare for the season with education, training, gear checks and drills, homeowners need to educate themselves about the risks of wildfire, learn how to mitigate hazards, take preventive measures and remain alert during the fire season.

To me, one of the most interesting facts about interface fires, is that most homes that succumb to fire are not destroyed by the flame front, but by firebrands that swirl out of the flames and smoke. Is your home protected from the hazard of these glowing embers? Have you cleared flammable debris and materials from your gutters, from beneath your porches and decks, and elsewhere around the house? Are there screens covering your eave and foundation vents and gable openings on your home? Are there other flammable surfaces or accumulations of burnable materials where embers might lodge and burn unnoticed until too late?

When firefighters move through interface neighborhoods ahead of a fire to secure what property they can, they employ a triage system to evaluate whether houses can be saved. They use this method to deploy resources most effectively, and to maintain an acceptable level of safety for firefighters and residents.

The triage system is pretty simple. Firefighters look at the type of house construction, the amount of cleared space around the house, the amount and nature of flammable material in the yard, and they evaluate outbuildings and hazardous materials to decide if a house:

- Needs little or no attention,
- Needs protective measures but can be saved, or
- Cannot be saved.

There is usually no time to argue or debate. Firefighters know what the fire is doing, know their capacity to fight it and understand how the house and fuels around it will respond when the fire arrives. If you have done your part as a conscientious homeowner, chances are good your house can be saved with little or no effort by the firefighters.

Another common denominator of fatal or near-fatal fires is that often there is not just one cause but a

chain of events—a sequence of smaller, seemingly inconsequential errors that begin to snowball, going unnoticed until tragedy is almost inevitable.

The same denominator may be common where homes and wildfire interface. Those who lose their homes to wildfire, often acknowledge they could have taken steps to prevent the loss. The very first step to correct this risky behavior is—don't think it can't hap-

pen to you. Complacency is your enemy and wildfire's friend.

Jeff Richardson is a former employee and firefighter for the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. He now makes his home in Central Oregon. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.