

Wildfire season:

7 ways you can help save lives and property

Homeowners living near forests or any fire-prone area can take simple preventive steps to limit damage from wildfires – actions that are increasingly important as more homes are built in or near such locations.

Communitywide programs can also significantly reduce wildfire threats.

Greater population density in areas susceptible to wildfire means more lives and property put at risk. It also results in escalating costs to control wildfires: State and federal agencies now spend more than \$3 billion per year on dealing with wildfires, twice as much as 10 years ago.

If you live within a mile of forests or any fire-prone landscape – public or private, rural or urban – here are seven ways you can help your community become “fire adapted,” courtesy of the [US Forest Service](#) report [Wildfire, Wildlands, and People: Understanding and Preparing for Wildfire](#) and other sources.

Homeowners living within a mile of forests or any fire-prone landscape – public or private, rural or urban – can take simple preventive steps to limit damage from wildfires. Here are seven ways to help your community become “fire adapted” and contain rising fire-control costs.

- Jonathan Harsch, Contributor

1. Be aware and prepared

When you smell smoke, it’s much too late to unroll your garden hose to water down the shingles of your cedar shake roof. If your home is among what the [US Forest Service](#) report describes as the “one-third of all housing units (homes, apartment houses, condominiums, etc.) in the coterminous [United States](#)” located within a mile of a forest or other fire-prone landscape, understand that wildfires are a natural, recurring part of your landscape – and therefore you need to take adequate precautions.

The Forest Service warns that precautions are needed more than ever because housing densities continue to increase in fire-risk areas. According to the Forest Service report, “Increases in the number, size, intensity, and duration of wildfires across large areas of the United States are being attributed in part of climate change.” Whatever the cause, the Forest Service reports that more and more Americans now live in “landscapes that are drier, less resilient, and more likely to burn once ignited.”

2. Create a 'personal wildfire defense zone'

Take simple steps to protect your home and family, starting with these.

- Create at least a three- to five-foot fire-free zone around your home and other structures.
- Remove all potential ignition sources such as pine needles, leaves, woodpiles, propane tanks, and so forth from within that zone.
- Clear gutters, eaves, and decks of leaves and debris.
- Remove all tree limbs overhanging your house and remove lower limbs that could allow a ground fire to climb to upper limbs.



- Remove dead material and keep trees and shrubs pruned and well spaced to slow an approaching wildfire.
- Choose less fire-prone deciduous trees rather than evergreens for planting near your home.
- Plant fire-resistant vegetation and keep lawns green and watered to serve as firebreaks. Rock gardens and xeriscapes serve the same purpose.
- Use nonflammable (Class A) roofing materials, and install glass skylights (not plastic ones).
- Use wide driveways and nonflammable walkways to slow or stop wildfire.

3. Have a written evacuation plan

The Forest Service and other organizations urge residents to have a formal evacuation plan. Notes the Forest Service: “Such proactive action on the part of homeowners is critical because when a wildfire occurs, it might be impossible for firefighters to reach and protect all individual properties, depending on the fire’s size and intensity and the availability of firefighting resources.” This warning means that homeowners could be left to face a wildfire on their own – and could be forced to evacuate.

Because evacuation remains a possibility for any home in a fire-risk area, prepare for it.

- Write an evacuation plan shared with all family members and preferably with neighbors, too.
- Decide on family gathering points and alternative evacuation routes that may be decided by wind and fire directions.
- Keep a list of important papers, purses and wallets, cellphones, laptops, personal belongings, animals, food, water, blankets, and other items you would want to take with you.
- Ensure that at least one dependable vehicle is always gassed up and ready to roll.
- List phone numbers including emergency services to inform people when you evacuate and where you’re headed.

4. Support a communitywide wildfire strategy

Homeowners are the first line of defense to protect their property and loved ones. But the Forest Service report also stresses that “reducing the loss of lives, property, infrastructure, and natural resources from wildfires depends on long-term community action.”

This action begins with efforts to become a “fire adapted” community. Such a community, the report advises, does the following.

- Accepts “fire as a part of the surrounding landscape.”
- Reduces “the risk of brush, grass, and forest fires.”
- Agrees on “a community-wide pre-fire strategy as well as actions, to reduce risks and thus costs.”
- Will “work together to remove fuels, reduce ignition sources, modify structures, prepare the larger landscape for fire, and build strong local response capability.”
- Will “use codes and ordinances where possible, develop internal safety zones, build external fuel buffers, use preventive education, and form partnerships to address hurdles that can deter some people from participating in fire-risk reduction activities.”

5. Write a Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP)

You may live in a community where your homeowners association still requires cedar shakes and evergreen plantings near each home. The Forest Service sees slow progress toward changing such fire-blind attitudes: “The National Association of State Foresters (NASF) estimates that nearly 6,000 communities nationwide had developed and implemented CWPPs by 2009, but these accounted for less than 10 percent of the nearly 70,000 communities identified by NASF as being at-risk.”

As a homeowner, you can do your part by supporting new local zoning ordinances and codes to enforce the following:

- Mandatory defensible-space standards, as listed in Step 2 to create a wildfire defense zone.
- Wildfire review processes for planned developments.
- Subdivision regulations.
- Development plan standards applied to both existing and planned new developments.
- Realtor disclosure of wildfire hazard zones.
- Water availability requirements.
- Access for firefighting equipment.
- Evacuation plans for residents.
- Insurance incentives for reducing risks in home ignition zones.

6. Continue to educate your family, neighbors, and community

“Wildfire research has shown that individuals and families can protect their properties against wildfires by addressing three clear sources of vulnerability: the home or business itself, the landscaping near a building, and the general vegetation in the area surrounding the building. Each of these sources can be dealt with through maintenance, structural improvements, and vegetation control. Many of these projects are affordable and can be done in a weekend.”

That’s sound advice from the Institute for Business & Home Safety (IBHS). For detailed [checklists for protecting your home](#) from wildfire – such as installing fine-mesh metal screens on all attic and foundation vents to block wind-blown hot embers – [IBHS provides nine online guides](#) for central [U.S.](#), [Florida](#), Great Lakes, Midatlantic/Northeast, [Pacific Northwest](#), Rocky Mountain, [southern California](#), Southeast, and Southwest.

Finally, remember that if your home catches fire and that fire starts a wildfire, you could be held responsible for paying the full cost of extinguishing the wildfire.

7. Use wildfire resources on the Web

National and state wildfire policies continue to evolve. In the past, authorities relied on suppressing fires. Today, they are more inclined to let smaller fires burn. These new pro-fire policies and “prescribed burns” are designed to avoid a buildup of flammable vegetation that results in less frequent but more intense fires.

For the latest information, visit websites including these.

- [Fire Adapted Communities Coalition](#)

- [National Fire Protection Association](#)
- [Firewise Communities](#)
- [International Association of Fire Chiefs' "Ready, Set, Go!" program](#)
- [Institute for Business & Home Safety](#)
- "Wildfire, Wildland, and People: Understanding and Preparing for Wildfire," the [US Forest Service's 2013 40-page report](#) (pdf)

More states and communities now offer direct support to homeowners, such as providing free home fire-risk inspections and free or cost-shared clearing, chipping, and disposal of debris. The Maine Forest Service, for example, provides a free [Defensible-Space Chipping Program brochure](#)(pdf) to remove cleared materials. The US Forest Service provides a comprehensive [database of state and local wildfire hazard mitigation programs](#) (though it hasn't been updated since January 2010 because of budget constraints).