

# FOOTHILLS OBSERVER

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A forest stewardship and wildfire mitigation newsletter for the rural landowner, provided by Fremont County Firewise

Fall 2006

## A Word to the Firewise

*Excerpts taken from Wildland Firefighter Magazine. July 2006, "A Word to the Firewise" Traci Weaver.*

Following the horrific fire season that Texas suffered this winter, 17 lives lost, 440 homes lost, and 1.6 million acres burned, many people are looking at what happened and how to move forward.

What happened was unclear. The Texas Forest Service's Urban Wildland Interface Coordinator, Justice Jones led a team that did a case study immediately after the fires to try and answer the question of why. "The most surprising thing to me is that stone and brick

homes with metal roofs were burning-homes that at first glance firefighters would classify as low risk," Jones says. "In this case, it was not a 50' wall of flames destroying the homes-it was flames from one- or two- inch tall grass. It was truly an example of the home only being as strong as its weakest link."

What was the weakest link? Primarily, the culprits were wood porches with no screening underneath, cedar posts and landscape timbers. Another factor that came into play: low fuel moisture. After a 15-20 inch

rainfall deficit across much of Texas, vegetation was not the only dry fuel available to burn. Homes dry out too. We have the same situation in Fremont County. Although our rainfall is generally around 20 inches annually, the percentages are extremely low. As of August 12<sup>th</sup>, the average monthly precipitation was only 32% of normal, county wide. Fremont County is exceptionally dry. That means that your house is just as dry as the surrounding fuels.

Shortly after the Texas fires, we had our own

wildfire. Homestead Park was an eye opening experience for many residents and fire personnel of Fremont County. The fuel was so dry, so early that it startled some how intense it burned. The mostly surface fire destroyed four cabins, all of which had metal roofs.

What the Texas study accomplished was a change in the way that people looked at being Firewise. The defensible space message to the general public needed adjustment, since it primarily focuses on removing heavy vegetation around homes and installing fire resistant roofing material. While those factors are still important, so is convincing a homeowner to screen open areas where firebrands can collect and to use non-flammable materials like river rock or pea gravel adjacent to any

*Continued on page 3.*



PHOTO COURTESY TEXAS FOREST SERVICE

**Top:** This home was built entirely of stone and had sufficient defensible space. The only weak point: the tiny wooden deck at the back door, which was also made of wood. The homeowner thought he was safe since the home was still standing after the fire passed, but a small spot fire in the yard crept all the way around the house until it reached the wooden deck and door. Within minutes the entire house was consumed and the homeowner could do nothing but watch.

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## Slash, Slash, and More Slash

When creating defensible space around your home or thinning out the forested acreage that you own, the amount of slash that is generated from only a few trees can be astonishing. It does not take long to create a giant pile of limbs, twigs, and needles. So what should you do with all of this slash?

There are several options for disposing of this material. The best method is to find somewhere to use it. This can be done by using it as a heating source, chipping it up for animal bedding or using the chips as landscaping mulch.

Burning the slash is another feasible, cost-effective method of removal. There are several ways to burn the piles. The first method is to create multiple small piles in openings in the forest. Then, **when conditions are right**, these piles would be burned simultaneously. This is most effective when the area is far from neighboring properties because it does carry a higher potential of escape.

The second method of pile burning involves creating one large pile. Then take material from the large pile and create one small pile a short distance away. This small pile is ignited and then material is continually brought from the large pile and placed in the small fire until the large pile is completely gone. This method is much safer than the multiple pile burning method because you are constantly monitoring the pile and you can easily adjust the size of the flames. Both of these methods are cost effective and work very well. **BEWARE:** piles burning on your property can get away from you and turn into a wildfire even if you are monitoring them and have taken precautions. You can be held financially responsible for any damage that your fire creates.

If you can't find a place to use the slash and you don't feel comfortable, or the conditions don't warrant burning, you can either 'lop and scatter' the slash or haul it off your property. To lop and scatter, you just cut the slash into small pieces and spread it out across the landscape. Try to keep the slash as close to the ground as possible (<12" high). This method is easy, but it leaves a lot of fuel on the forest floor that can burn and it is quite unsightly for many years while it turns red and slowly begins to decompose.

Hauling slash can be a cumbersome and time consuming process, but overall it is a great method for disposing of the slash. It completely removes the slash from the area in a safe manner and it drastically reduces the fire potential.

It is important to follow the rules when using community slash piles. These slash piles are for **Slash Only!** No grass clippings, old fence posts, construction debris,

household waste, or any other type of trash is allowed. These are not dumps, they are offered free of charge to the residents of Fremont County as a means to help reduce the fuel loading on private property. Every time someone puts non-slash into the piles, they run the risk of having the piles closed down for all of the residents. In Union Pass, local residents have been visiting the piles on a regular basis and have been removing non-slash items in order to keep the pile open and available. Please remember that these piles are a privilege and should be treated as such.

For more information on proper burning techniques, location of slash piles or other information concerning fuel reduction on your property, please contact Fremont County Firewise, or the local offices of the Wyoming State Forestry Division, USFS, BLM, or the BIA.



Slash piles can get very large, very quick.

## Word to Firewise (cont.)

wooden aspects of the home, including decks and fences.

"When a homeowner thinks he has to replace his roof to be 'Firewise', he might get discouraged because of the cost. From what we saw, there are several steps people can take that are much less costly and sometimes just as effective." Says Jones. "For example, surrounding the first few feet

around a home with river rock or enclosing wooden decks with wire screening can have a huge impact on home's survivability in a wildfire situation, with minimal cost to the homeowner."

Whether it is a large forest fire or a one- or two- inch grass fire, if a continuous path of fuel is allowing the fire to burn right up to your house, it will burn down. Once decks or porches ig-

nite, the home will be engulfed in a matter of minutes. Spot fires are likely to ignite when they land in fine fuels such as dry grass or pine needles. If these are the fuels surrounding your home, you are at risk. For more information please contact your local fire officials.



Shake shingles are still dangerous, but the cost of replacing discourages many landowners.



National WUI  
Conference.  
Denver, CO  
November 2—4,  
2006

The National Wildland/ Urban Interface Fire Working Team/Firewise Communities will hold its second National Wildland/Urban Interface Fire Education Conference, "*Backyards and Beyond*," in Denver, Colorado November 2-4, 2006. This conference provides a great opportunity to network with other like-minded professionals and to share best practices. The

diverse group of attendees will provide invaluable information to take back with you to your community and workplace. You will be able to customize your educational experience by choosing from more than 70 educational sessions over six conference tracks.

This is a great opportunity to see what other communities are doing across the country

and to interact with different professionals in the fire community. The registration fee is \$175 before October 18<sup>th</sup> and \$225 after the 18<sup>th</sup>. If you are interested in attending, please visit [www.firewise.org](http://www.firewise.org) to register or contact Fremont County Firewise to get more information.

## Firewise Conference in Denver

## Are you a Good Neighbor?

If you live in one of Fremont County's mountain subdivisions your neighbor is likely a government agency. Many area subdivisions are adjacent to or even surrounded by either U.S. Forest Service lands, BLM, State, or Tribal lands.

The goal of fuel treatments is to reduce the fuel loading so that an approaching fire will be less intense. Any such work is only as effective as the neighboring property.

If a fire occurs and has a jackpot of fuels on your neighbor's property, your

property, regardless of fuel treatments, will sustain more damage. Even if the fire drops to the surface from the crowns (a common behavior when fire reaches treated areas), the heat that was generated from the heavily loaded property may scorch your trees and even ignite your home with the radiant heat.

If your neighbor is a private landowner, you need to express your concerns and see if you can help them implement some sort of fuel treatment. If your neighbor is a state or federal agency, you need to encourage

them to implement fuel treatments. With the Healthy Forest Restoration Act that was passed a few years ago, it is much easier for these agencies to implement treatments in the WUI. Have your homeowners association or community group approach the agency with your concerns and work with them to get the results that you desire.

Just like anything else, things can go wrong. Homestead Park is one example of a prescribed burn that was aimed at fuel reduction that went wrong. The agencies have many

tools that they can use to lessen fire danger, and prescribed burning is just one.

If you work with the agencies and not against them, both parties can benefit. The government agencies are striving to become better neighbors to the ever growing number of subdivisions in the area, we just need to continue to move forward and keep a working relationship with them.

# FREMONT COUNTY FIREWISE

Wildfire Safety Through Prevention & Education

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WERE ON THE WEB!

[WWW.FREMONTCOUNTYFIREWISE.COM](http://WWW.FREMONTCOUNTYFIREWISE.COM)

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## Purdy Fire Continues to Threaten Union Pass

As of August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2006 the Purdy Fire was still burning and filling the Wind River basin with smoke. The fire is estimated at 22,200 acres and only about 40 percent contained. The fire is inching nearer the voluntary evacuation line each day. Improved fire weather has allowed the incident management team to better secure the perimeters of the fire using dozers and direct attack by firefighters. As with any large fire burning in the fuel type that is present, the possibility of a blowup is always there. If the weather decides to dry up and the winds come, the fire could jump containment lines and continue to burn towards the Union Pass and Upper Wind River areas.

This incident showed just how unprepared many homes on Union Pass really are. The evacuation planning was well organized and was ready to be implemented at a moments notice. The homes on the other hand were not ready.

The incident management team that was on hand assessed every property in the area and provided one of three ratings for each home. "Green" meant that the home 'needed no attention for now", this was the best possible rating. There was only 1 home rated "green" in the entire Porcupine subdivision. The next rating was "blue". This meant that the home was threatened, but could be saved with some work. This is what the majority of the homes in the area were rated. The last rating was that of "red". This meant that the home was "Hopeless" and "Too dangerous to defend". Of these, there were 16 in the Warm Springs Subdivision and Crooked Creek area and another 8 located in Porcupine.

In all, the incident management team had labeled 26 houses as "red" in the Union Pass area. This means that there were 26

homes in the area that would not have even been attempted to be protected because they posed such a threat to firefighters.

Residents of the area need to remember that this was not a drill or a table top exercise. This was the real thing and if your home was labeled "red", it was not going to be protected. If a fire occurs and the resources needed to help the "blue" houses are not here yet, many of them will be left to fend for themselves as well.

Creating defensible space is not an attempt to de-forest your property and is not an attempt by the government to meddle in your business, it is strictly meant to help firefighters defend your home and allow your home to defend itself against a wildfire. Union Pass area residents were lucky, but this is not the last fire that will occur in the area.