

## **Fall Wildfire Tips**

We have been very fortunate for the last two years when you consider the lack of damage from the wildfires that we have had. We started out in the spring of 2022 with the Plumtaw fire putting up a column of smoke that was the focal point of everyone's attention. Thanks to air support and on the ground efforts of fire crews, no buildings or lives were lost. The fire burned towards an area that had received forest treatments the previous fall and it was stopped there. We then had a wet summer and things were relatively quiet after that.

2023 was a different story. There was smoke in the air for most of the summer. At one point there were about a dozen fair size fires burning within 100 miles of Pagosa Springs. Between the Chris Mountain, Coal Mine, Bear Creek and Quartz Ridge fires almost 5000 acres were burned within 20 miles of Pagosa Springs. The fire crews did a great job incorporating previous planning, taking advantage of weather and terrain, and with boots on the ground to give them viable choices as to where to contain the fires. Again, no lives or structures were lost.

There is no way of predicting how many fires we will have or whether or not one will directly impact our community, but we do have a responsibility to ourselves, our families and our neighbors to make preparations for the inevitable. Please don't assume that it can't happen here just because it has not happened recently. Wildfire is a serious threat to almost every home in our county. Ignoring that fact will never make it go away. Understanding what the threat is can help us prepare for it.

The bulk of our local forests have not seen a significant wildfire for over 140 years. That is a lot of time for unchecked growth of potential fuel. Without fire to thin the trees and underbrush, that excessive growth is so close together and reaching from the ground to the tree crowns that huge fires have become the norm.

A lot of our residents here feel very safe because their homes are nowhere near the forest. Unfortunately, that may not make a difference. Most of the homes lost to wildfire are never directly touched by the flames. Most of the structure loss is caused by the blizzard of embers that blow ahead of the fire, starting spot fires outside of the area that is burning. Those embers can travel over a mile. All it takes is one ember landing on some kindling and you have a new fire start. Usually, you will see hundreds of embers swirling ahead of the fire. If those embers enter your house or find some kindling on or near your house, there is a good chance that your house will catch fire, too.

Fall is a great time to take steps to safeguard your house. Some basic steps can make a big difference.

- Sign up for Archuleta County Citizen's Alert at <https://www.archuletacounty.org/569/Citizens-Alert---NIXLE#:~:text=Archuleta%20County%20Sheriff%20utilizes%20an,the%20sign-up%20widget%20below>
- Clean the leaves and pine needles off of the roof.
- Clean the eavestroughs.
- Make sure all attic and soffit vents have 1/8" metal screening.
- Chimneys need spark arrestors (They keep birds out of your woodstove, too).
- Repair any holes or gaps in the siding.
- Crawl space vents need 1/8" metal screening.
- Rake up leaves and needles within 10' of the structure.
- Remove all combustibles on, under or near wooden decks.
- Install metal screening under the deck to keep duff and critters out.
- Maintain decks and stairs. Dried out wood is more flammable than oil stained or painted wood.
- Use non-combustible fencing within 5' of the house. (If you cannot do that, then clear the combustibles from either side of the fence for its entire length.)
- **Move firewood piles at least 30' away from structures.**
- Remove any combustible plants within 10' of the house.
- Within 30' of the house, mow grasses to a 6" height or less.
- **Ornamental junipers and spruce are highly flammable.** Don't plant them within 10 feet of the house.

For those of you who don't live here full time, fall cleanup is especially important. Fire season begins earlier each year. Any threats to your home that aren't taken care of before winter will still be there come spring. Wildfires might start before you get back in the spring to do your cleanup.

These are some good fall fire cleanup tips. If you want to learn what else you can do, especially with the vegetation within 100 feet of your home, check with Wildfire Adapted Partnership at 970-385-8909. You can sign up for their E-News at [wildfireadapted.org](http://wildfireadapted.org) and be one of the first to know when their free assessments, mitigation and chipper rebate programs reopen in the spring.