Texas Council Risk Management Fund

Wildfires

Recent declarations of “critical fire danger” and red flag warnings are valuable alerts from the National Weather Service that wind, humidity, and drought conditions can result in uncontrollable wildfires anywhere in Texas. We readily think of forest fires like the 25,000-acre fire near Bastrop in 2011 that destroyed almost 2,000 homes and killed two people. But we need to expand that awareness to encompass wildfires in the Hill Country, the Panhandle, North Texas, or wherever conditions are ripe. In late March and early April of 2022, wildfires just south of Interstate 20 destroyed thousands of acres of farm and ranch land, forced the evacuation of four towns, left one town totally wiped out by fire, and killed a Sheriff’s Deputy trying to help people escape the fire. Luckily this Eastland Complex fire was eventually contained by low winds, higher humidity, and the efforts of hundreds of fire fighters and their land and airborne resources.

The Texas A&M Forest Service responds to wildfires and helps marshal the people and equipment to fight the fires. They can also bring heavy equipment, like bull dozers and aircraft, small planes and helicopters, and large jet aircraft to drop water and fire retardants. In most cases, the first responders to a wildfire are usually the local volunteers and community fire departments. During the Eastland Complex fire, those local responses were soon overwhelmed by the passage of a cold front and high winds that spread the fire along its front, and with the spread of embers that advanced the fire at thousand yard or mile wide jumps. The Forest Service called on the Texas Intrastate Fire Mutual Aid System to respond. These resources and rain eventually contained the fire after it had burned 54,513 acres.

How can these wildfires be prevented? In about 10% of cases lightning is the cause but in about 90% of cases human activity starts the fire. That is why we see “Burn Ban in Effect” signs in communities and hear about Red Flag Warnings declared by the National Weather Service. Outside burning can easily escape and overcome a person using a garden hose or rake and spread quickly out of control. Vehicles with catalytic converters parked over dry grass can start fires. Cigarette butts can start fires. Firecrackers and bottle rockets can start fires. Campfires, and outside incinerators all contribute. Any campfire should be completely extinguished using water before leaving a campsite. When critical fire weather is forecast, avoid any outside ignition sources.

What can be done to protect homes and center buildings? The National Forest Service and the National Fire Protection Association recommend “defensible space” around a home or building. They recommend:

- Removal of trees and other vegetation near the building, especially tree branches that extend over a roof. Tree canopy should be at least 10 feet from the roof. Tree canopies should be at least six to ten feet above the ground.
- Keep combustible fuels away from trees that can carry fire into the canopy.

- Keep gutters and roof valleys clear of dead leaves and other litter that can be ignited by heat or flying embers.
- Eliminate a “fuse” of combustible material that comes from the interface with the wildfire source to the dwelling or building.
- Stacks of firewood should be away from the structure or propane tanks.
- Landscaping around the foundation of the structure should be minimal or include rock, grass, or evergreen groundcover to help slow the spread of fire.
- Open areas beneath decks should be enclosed with wire screening to prevent the accumulation of combustible material.
- Attic vents, soffit, or eave vents should be screened to prevent entry of embers into an attic.
- Inspect the roof and repair or replace missing shingles.
- Keep lawn areas watered and closely mowed and remove clippings and other yard debris.

More information about defensible space is available at nfpa.org. Another resource for information about the location and status of wildfires is a website that locates all active fires in the United States and gives information about location, size, containment, and resources working the fire. The website is at inciweb.nwg.gov. Another similar website is fireweatheravalanche.org/fire. If you smell smoke in the air, it’s time to check for a fire nearby.