

Southern Oregon Climate Action Now

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SPOTLIGHT

WHEN CLIMATE CHANGE EQUALS WILDFIRE

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First of a two-part series. In Part II, we'll share specific Firewise guidelines for analyzing the different zones of your landscape and prioritizing specific steps to take in each zone.

GREETINGS FELLOW DENIZENS OF THE WUI. That's pronounced "Wooie", short for the wildland-urban interface. If you hadn't internalized previously what it means to live in the WUI, September 8, 2020, probably changed all that.

The WUI is where structures and human development mingle and meet with undeveloped wildland or vegetation. Think of it as a main stage for human-environment conflicts. Conflicts like invasive species run amok, fragmented habitat, reduced biodiversity--and wildfires.

All of Ashland is in the WUI, and is one of 19 of 23 Jackson County communities considered by the Oregon Department of Forestry to be at high risk of wildfire. So, here we are, and it's up to us to step up and take our position seriously. This means taking immediate action to reduce wildfire risk in our yards and neighborhoods, and committing to ongoing, long-term steps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions that are escalating our risk of fires well into the future.

"We're living in a climate that is changing," says Katie Gobble, Fire Adapted Communities Coordinator for Ashland. "Wildfire season is getting longer and wildfires are burning more severely. In 2020, the US had four of the 10 largest fires in our country's history all in one year."

Gobble spoke recently at the first in a series of climate-related Zoom programs hosted by the City of Ashland Climate and Energy Programs to be offered over the coming months as part of the city's "Adapt Your Home" campaign. She is providing another program on home wildfire risk reduction and evacuation on May 6 at 6pm.

(fireadaptedashland.org/wildfireprep)

"The Adapt Your Home campaign focuses on taking action at home and in our daily lives to reduce those emissions and prepare for the effects of climate change," explains Bridgette Bottinelli, Climate Outreach Coordinator for the city. "We're going to have less snowpack and more days of extreme heat which affects our natural resources and increases our fire risk. By being prepared, we can take action on things that we can control to put our loved ones in a safer position when an emergency does hit." The campaign centerpiece is its snazzy new website www.ashland.or/climate-energy.

The 2020 Alameda fire was ushered in by an unprecedented series of conditions: hot dry winds with gusts over 50 miles an hour and low relative humidity. Under such conditions, “a wildfire can get out of control and turn into an urban fire when the fuel is spread home-to-home,” says Gibble. “That’s when our resources are overwhelmed and we have what equates to a disaster.”

As traumatic as the Alameda fire was, Gibble says that photos taken by Ashland fire department personnel after the fire suggest that landscaping actions taken by homeowners long before the fire actually helped protect some homes and reduce house-to-house spread.

The first step is to understand the risks on your property. In 2018 and 2019 fire personnel did a quick curbside wildfire risk assessment of every property in Ashland. The assessment was sent to every house via postcard, and is also available on the Fire Adapted Ashland website. If you need assistance to find your home’s assessment, email wildfire@ashland.or.us.

Additionally, residents can contact Ashland Fire & Rescue for a home wildfire risk assessment by appointment. Gibble does these assessments herself, and not surprisingly, she’s in high demand right now. A better solution at this point is for neighborhoods to request an assessment for the whole neighborhood. “I highly recommend that you gather together to work on reducing your risk together,” Gibble urges. After all, wildfires don’t usually recognize property lines.

In another attempt to make home risk assessments more accessible, Ashland Fire & Rescue is launching a Wildfire Risk Assessment Program to train volunteers. It’s the first program of its kind in the entire country. “Social science has shown that the best way to get people to take action is through one-on-one interaction,” says Gibble. Residents can apply through April 23 at ashland.or.us/wrap to participate in the rigorous and comprehensive WRAP training.

Residents should also investigate whether their neighborhood is already designated as a Firewise Community. Firewise is a national program that helps neighbors get organized, find direction, and take action to reduce their fire risk. Ashland currently has 35 Firewise Communities--the most within any single town in the country, but these still cover less than 10 percent of the city’s residents.

The most important step that we all can take is to get rid of flammable plants and any dead or dried vegetation lying around the yard--especially anything close to the house. Through a partnership with Recology, neighborhoods can apply to get a supersized green debris bin from mid-April to the end of May. In addition, May 2nd is the 10th Annual Green Debris Drop Off Day at the Valley View Transfer Station, a day when residents can drop off excess green debris at no cost from 8:30 to 3:30.

Lorrie Kaplan is Chair of the [Ashland Climate Action Project \(ACAP\) of Southern Oregon Climate Action Now](#). She can be reached at ACAPSpotlight@socan.eco. For more information on Ashland’s CEAP goals and targets, visit www.ashland.or.us/climate

Links to Learn More

- Ashland Fire Adapted Communities--info about your home risk assessment score, Green Debris Drop Off Day, and neighborhood Green Debris Bin application, and how to apply for the volunteer Wildfire Risk Assessment Program (WRAP): fireadaptedashland.org/wildfireprep

- Ashland Climate & Energy – www.ashland.or.us/climate or @AshlandClimateandEnergy on Facebook
- Ashland Firewise Communities -- including a map of Firewise neighborhoods -- fireadaptedashland.org/firewise
- Videos of the March 11 Wildfire Forum and March 18 Wildfire and Climate Change Program -- go to YouTube and search for CityofAshlandOR

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