

Living with Wildfire

It is becoming more common to read headlines like these pulled from Associated Press in the past two years, “Texas wildfire burns at least 6 homes; 150 more evacuated” and “25 homes destroyed in central Texas wildfire”. Smokey the Bear will tell you that 9 out of 10 wildfires are human-caused. For this reason it is not just wise, it is imperative that each household have a knowledge of actions they should take to protect their property from Wildfire.

For obvious reasons the potential of wildfire increases dramatically during times of drought. As our population continues to increase in Texas we of course are having some of that growth out in areas that were previously ranch, farm or native areas. Add to this mix our normal cycles of drought and high winds and it can make for increased chances of wildfires.

During 2009 there were over 6 million acres burned across the USA. On Cordillera Ranch we have had a few small wildfires during the past few years. Fortunately these have been quickly contained by neighbors and the Volunteer Fire Departments before they did any damage to homes. In each of these cases the fire was human-caused.

“Wildfire” is the term applied to any unwanted, unplanned, damaging fire burning in forest, shrub or grass and is one of the most powerful natural forces known to man. While sometimes caused by lightning, nearly all wildfires are caused by people. There are four key factors why the number of acres burned remained high over the past few years. 1) past fire suppression policies allowed for the accumulation of fuel in the form of fallen leaves, branches, and excessive plant overgrowth in forest and wildland areas 2) Increasing dry, hot weather 3) Changing weather patterns across the USA and 4) Increased residential development in the wildland / urban interface. You can see how we fit right into this pattern at Cordillera Ranch, so please read on to find what we need to think about and do to be better prepared.

Clearly our best defense for preventing wildfire on Cordillera Ranch will be to honor some time tested rules for the use and control of fire.

Some of the ways that humans cause wildfire is with campfires, debris burning and motorized equipment in native areas. These kinds of activities can all be fun and safe if done with the proper precautions and planning. **A good place to learn more about the steps you should take to keep these activities safe from wildfire can be found at www.smokeybear.com website, which also provides a large amount of other information about wildfires, the science of fires and educational resources for helping children understand more about fire safety in the outdoors.** *(On Cordillera Ranch all debris burning can only be done after a burning permit is obtained through the development office. The key aspect of obtaining this permit is confirming the safety and supervision planning of the burn.)*

On Cordillera Ranch you are now living in a wildland interface and so we need to concentrate on some safety tips to use around your home. Wildland-urban interface fires tend to be more damaging than urban structural fires, and behave differently from structural fires. The wildland-urban interface is the area where homes and other human development meet or intermingle with undeveloped forest, grasslands or other natural areas. People who live in these areas often forget or disregard the wildland fire cycles and dangers. Homes and other structures are built and maintained in a manner that leaves them and their occupants vulnerable. Thus, fire becomes a significant threat to both humans and natural resources.

Here are a few items that should be educated into your household and then followed carefully to reduce the potential of wildfire loss.

- Charcoal briquettes and ash from woodstoves / fireplaces CAN start wildfires. When disposing of these items outside, drown them with lots of water; stir them, and soak again. Be sure they are out cold.

- Sparks from lawnmowers and power equipment DO start wildfires. Be careful on hot, dry days, and be sure to get your equipment checked regularly to insure spark arrestors and mufflers are working properly.
- If you are going to smoke outdoors, safe practices require at least a 3 foot clearing around the smoker. Grind out the cigarette, cigar or pipe tobacco in the dirt. Never grind it on a stump or log. Never throw it away into the brush or leaves. It is unsafe to smoke while walking or riding a horse or trail bike because you never know where the ash will land. Use your ash tray while you are in your car.
- Creating a 30 foot zone of fire-resistant space around your home will help prevent fires from starting near or spreading to your home. In addition, consider using fire resistant plants and landscaping that may help to protect your house from a wildfire. *(This fire-resistant space will most likely include some native area outside your landscape envelope on Cordillera Ranch lots, but can be achieved through selective pruning of your Ashe Juniper trees, removal of fallen branches, and cutting back the tall grasses after they have died back in the winter. The easiest way to cut back the native grass is with power weedwackers, you might think of these as your “mechanical buffalo” and they will reduce the height of the grass much as a herd would have done two hundred years ago.)*
- For more tips on how to better protect your home visit www.firefree.org/tensteps.html or www.firewise.org.

If you should encounter a wildfire, the first and most important step will be to contact the Fire Station through 911 to seek assistance. Remember fire takes three elements to survive, HEAT / OXYGEN / FUEL. Starve or eliminate any of one of these elements and you can put out the fire. If you can do it safely, you can help fight the fire with a water hose or extinguisher (take away the heat), water bucket & wet burlap bag / beach towel (smother the oxygen) or shovel (remove the fuel). If you believe you can fight the fire, don't do it alone and take care in establishing your fighting position to avoid smoke inhalation and enabling a safe exit path. **Each family is encouraged to have a training discussion with all members to understand the proper response to a wildfire.**

