

Wildfires

Arkansas has a long history of wildfires in its forests. Each year thousands of acres of Arkansas wildland and many homes are threatened or destroyed by fire during the fire season that lasts from February to October. Wildfires occur in every month of the year, but are most prevalent in the spring and late summer. Severe wildfire outbreaks can occur in winter after long-term droughts and drying winds. Fire indices are used to give a general measure of forest fire potential. One index is the Cumulative Severity Index (CSI) that combines temperature and rainfall and equates it to forest fire potential. Under average conditions, the CSI averages around 350 and 400. Every few years, however, the CSI has reached over 750 relating to extreme fire danger.

Wildfires are not limited to forests, however. As Arkansas' population has grown, more and more people are moving into the zone termed the urban wildland interface; the area adjacent to forests or wildland. Although homeowners cannot control the weather, they can design their homes and landscapes to maximize the best chance of survival. Federal and state governments have developed several excellent guides called "FireWise" for homeowners that, if followed, might just save someone's home or even someone's life. The following recommendations are based on the Arkansas Forestry Commission's publication entitled "Living with Wildlife: A Guide for Arkansas Homeowners."

There are things that homeowners can do right now to increase the chance that their home might survive a wildfire:

- Don't burn anything under the current burn ban. That means your trash, brush, leaves, etc. Most fires in Arkansas are caused through carelessness or arson. Use some common sense.
- Ask yourself: "Is there at least a 30-foot buffer surrounding my home that is "lean, clean and green"? Follow this checklist.
 - Use low-growing herbaceous plants that are kept green during the fire season.
 - Use mulches, rock and other non-combustible hard surfaces.
 - Have a bonded contractor remove tree limbs within 15 feet of a chimney or within 150 feet vertical clearance from power lines or any limbs that touch the house.
 - Remove all dead vegetation from around the house. This means removing leaves in the gutter, under the porch or within 30 feet of your house. You can also water any vegetation next to the house.
 - Remove "ladder" fuels which are low-hanging branches, tall weeds, grasses and shrubs at least 30 feet away from your home. If you have an Eastern Red Cedar next to your house, either remove it or prune it up at least 10 feet: cedars are basically little incinerators waiting for a spark.
 - Plant vegetation that is "fire smart" or that is less likely to ignite from a wildfire.
 - Create fuel breaks such as an open lawn and wide walkways.
 - Make sure that your fireplace chimney is free of creosote. Don't stack your firewood next to the house.

The most important thing that a person can do is practice common sense. Don't throw your cigarettes out the window. If you see someone throw a cigarette from their vehicle, call the State Police at 1-866-811-1222 to report littering and report these thoughtless acts.

If you see flames, get away from the danger. Don't stay and fight. Let firemen or trained volunteers do that. You can assure that you have adequate access for fire fighting trucks by not blocking your drive and by making fence openings. If there is adequate time, you might leave your hose connected to the spigot. Close all exterior and interior doors and windows. Close all exterior vents. Prop a ladder against the house so that firefighters

have easy access to the roof. Shut off propane at the tank. But the bottom line is to get out fast when you see flames.

Information on wildfires and how to reduce wildfire risk can be found on several web sites. One is the Arkansas FireWise site:

- <http://www.arkansasfirewise.com/>
The Arkansas Forestry Commission is responsible for the protection of 19,727,978 acres of non-federal or private forestland in Arkansas. They can assist communities, homeowners and forest landowners in protecting their property

through proper landscaping for homes and building fire lanes for landowners.

- The National FireWise site is <http://www.firewise.org/>.
At least ten different chapters on being FireWise can be found at the national web site. This site includes audio and video tracts, publications and other materials.
- If you are interested in the latest fire statistics, go to <http://www.nifc.gov/>.

Wildfires occur frequently in Arkansas. Take steps to ensure that you are FireWise.