

Transcript
Firewise Chat Session
August 9, 2006

Judith_Leraas_Cook Welcome to today's chat session. Today we are going to talk about what to do if a wildfire threatens your home or community. My name is Judith Leraas Cook and I am the project manager for Firewise Communities/USA and am co-moderating today. Also moderating is Michele Steinberg, Special Projects Manager for the Firewise Communities program. Welcome, Michele!

Michele_Steinberg Thanks, Judith. I am pleased to see such a good turnout for today's chat.

Judith_Leraas_Cook Our chat speaker is Chuck Harris of Bigfork, Montana. Chuck has had over 35 years of wildland firefighting experience, both with the USDA-Forest Service and the Bigfork Fire Department. For those of you who do not know it, Bigfork has qualified as a Firewise Communities/USA recognition site. Please hold your questions until the end of Chuck's presentation. When he has finished, the chat will become completely interactive. We encourage you to join in at that time. Chuck, we know that you feel strongly about a homeowner's responsibility when it comes to preparing for a wildfire. What are the four things you would put at the top of the list for a homeowner to remember during wildfire season?

chuck_harris Hello everyone from smoky Mont.---the smoke is a good reminder that fire season is here. The 4 most important things a homeowner should remember; 1) clear the 30' defensible space around your structure(s), 2) clean ignition sources from home, 3) mark your access road or house #, and 4) have a good H2O supply

Judith_Leraas_Cook Now, would you please advise the group regarding the most important things to do if a wildfire is actually threatening homes?

chuck_harris Yes; first know what would "trigger" an evacuation, 2) store important documents either in a fire proof container, or at another site, 3) again make sure you have mitigated all ignition sources like cleaning the roof, your deck, stuff stored under your deck, vegetation growing at base of structure etc.

Judith_Leraas_Cook We know that when a wildfire actually burns through and homeowners evacuate, there are things they forget to do in their haste to leave. Would you describe a few of those?

chuck_harris My experience has told me that when folks have to evacuate, they often forget those important documents, prescription drugs, and sometimes pets, or farm animals

Judith_Leraas_Cook As you have been known to say, homes often ignite from a fire brand or an ember---not a roaring flame front. Would you be willing to describe this phenomenon so that our chat participants can get a better idea of how that works?

chuck_harris I think as we watch what the media keys in on is that roaring flame front coming up or over the hill---and it is true that this is the cause of home loss.....

chuck_harris but often, and again thru my experience in CA, OR, NM, AZ and here in MT, we too often see homes lost that were started by a small fire brand or ember--one that could have been put out with a gallon of water

Judith_Leraas_Cook We are aware that numerous homes survived the Brins fire in Sedona, AZ this year because they were 'Firewise'. Have you seen other examples of that sort of success that you would be willing to share?

chuck_harris I have seen success---the whole Firewise concept leads to a situation where we can change fire behavior by thinning, pruning and removing fuel--we can keep the fire out of the tree tops (crown fire) and get the fire "on-the-ground) when the fire is on the ground vs in the tree tops we can engage the fire w/equipment and crews

Judith_Leraas_Cook Do you have other thoughts for the group about homeowner preparation and response when wildfire threatens?

chuck_harris Yes, another concept that I like to discuss is the idea of staying in place vs evacuating now, there are a whole lot of variables, but there are many cases where if you have created defensible space around your home, and your neighbors have done likewise you may be able to stay in place and protect your home from fire brans w/that 1 gal. of water I talked about

Judith_Leraas_Cook Thank you so much, Chuck. This was really great information. We will post the transcript of today's session in the 'Chat Transcripts' area of forum within the next few days. The chat is now open to everyone. Feel free to ask questions of Chuck, Michele and myself. If anything is not answered during the chat, you can contact me at firewiseusa@aol.com. I will either respond directly or put you into contact with someone who can provide the information you need.

Claire_and_Bill_Cave Do you have Resident participation in Evacuation Drills?

Mike_Frost Hi Chuck: Great presentation! Have you heard anything about a 'reverse 911' system for notifying people about an impending fire?

Judith_Leraas_Cook Chuck....Are you willing to respond to these two?

chuck_harris yes. Claire/Bill---yes I work w/homeowners assoc. as the Firewise Grant Admin and help assoc. dev. a plan

chuck_harris Mike, are you talking about the system where?ispatch automatically get the home address or number

Mike_Frost Yes. I've heard that technology now permits an emergency dispatcher to circle an area on a map and push a button that automatically sends a message to all phones within the circle. They use it for Amber alerts.

Lisa Hi Chuck. Thanks for the great information. We have quite a few metal roofs popping up in our area and I am becoming increasingly interested in them, mainly aluminum. Can you speak about them from a fire safety standpoint or any experience with them?

Karen_Lightfoot Bernalillo County (NM)recently obtained reverse 911. It is good, but not a magic bullet. If you have a land line, listed or unlisted, it can reach you. If you have only cell or satellite service, no...depends on isolation of your subdivision

chuck_harris It's working here--but we work close w/the Forest Service and State dispatchers too.

Mike_Frost Thanks for the info.

chuck_harris Lisa, we see the same up here in MT, but it is as much for snow slipping off as it is for fire. Those type roofs are fire resistant, you still have to keep them clean---and you still have a risk of an ember getting under the little "v"s in each rib.

Mike_Frost How about communication systems for neighbors during an emergency. We [in Elkhorn, just north of Whitefish] have been talking about using simple hand held

radios with a predesignated channel [channel 5 for a '5 survive' system. That way, if the phones go out we'll at least be able to talk with eac

Claire_and_Bill_Cave Chuck, back to our issue about Resident involvement in Evacuations. Do you have trained Residents (such as CERTs - Community Emergency Response Teams) to assist in Evacuations when requested by Incident Commanders?

chuck_harris Mike that sound like an excellant idea---the radio----when things get hectic during a fire storm, alternate commo is a great idea

chuck_harris Claire, I have not heard of CERT's being used, tho there may be some---but we usually go thru the Co. Sheriff, who is in charge of evacuation procedures.

Judith_Leraas_Cook Communications is certainly an issue directly before and during a wildfire event. Do you have a list of instructions/suggestions, Chuck, that you distribute to homeowners for use at time of fire?

chuck_harris More on evacuation process---typically we have some lead time, from the time a fire is making a big run till we evac---so the IC and local law enforcement (C. Sher) will give a warning of a pending evac.

Mike_Frost On the subject on how 'firewising' can help; I recently heard that a 'shaded fuel break' supervised by Bill Swope (a good Montana guy) was the only line to hold in a recent Minn fire. 'Firewising' really can affect fire behavior.

chuck_harris Yes, we have brochures, I just gave some out this AM---they outline evac preparedness, what to do, what to take, who to notify, where to re-group etc.

Mike_Frost How can we get a copy of your brochure to distribute to neighbors?

chuck_harris Shade fuel breaks work in certain conditions---Bill and I have worked for yearS together on these concepts; shaded fuel breaks vs. commercial thinning and fuel reduction---shaded fuel breaks work on gentle ground and where you have less than 40 tons per ac of downed debris

Judith_Leraas_Cook Chuck - We hear about examples of folks who, in their haste to leave the homes, will forget to close garage doors, windows and vents. Does your brochure address those sort of housekeeping issue?

chuck_harris Mike, if I can have your address, I can send you copies, or e-mail you a Web site where you can access the info. Since you are close to me, feel free to give me a call here at Bigfork Fire 837-4590, or my cell 253-4590

chuck_harris Judith, the brochure does address that issue, it talks about windows , garage doors, power etc.

Mike_Frost Thanks Judith and Chuck for the great forum. I look forward to doing this again some time.

Judith_Leraas_Cook Thank you all for joining us today! Our next chat is scheduled for Wednesday, September 13...same time, same place. The topic will be the upcoming Backyards & Beyond conference to be held in Denver, November 2-4. We are pulling together our chat schedule for 2007 soon, and are interested in topics that would be interesting to folks. Let us know if you have ideas.

chuck_harris Thanks Judith, I'll enter chat next time, and I will be in Denver for the B & B Conf.

Michele_Steinberg Thanks, Judith, Chuck - this was a great chat.

Judith_Leraas_Cook Chuck - You were a wonderful guest. We are so pleased you could join us today....lightning storm and all!

Claire_and_Bill_Cave We are all looking forward to Denver.

Judith_Leraas_Cook So are we! It will be a wonderful conference.

Michele_Steinberg Thanks all! Catch you on Sept. 13 and in Denver in November.

christina.fowler Thank you. It was a great session.

Judith_Leraas_Cook Thanks, again, Chuck. I hope you have a completely uneventful day with regard to fires in Bigfork. See you in Denver!