

FIREWISE PRINCIPLES

(How to protect your house, improve emergency access, and have healthy, beautiful forests)

The Fire Wise Program started about 20 years ago as a response to devastating fires in the expanding Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) (translation: subdivisions built in rural areas that have high to extreme fire danger. Think the foothills of Jefferson County - a perfect example. Forty years ago hardly anyone lived here, now a LOT of people live in the WUI. Bear Mountain Vista is highly vulnerable.).

Foresters studied fire behavior and came up with some amazing insights. First, while the "wall of flame" kills people and animals by sucking the oxygen from the air and creating intense heat, other factors lead to the loss of structures and the ability of fire to run unchecked. Second, some very simple mitigation techniques can make an *incredible* difference in depriving fires of fuel and saving structures.

These techniques are called mitigation. When we think of this we often associate it with clear cutting back from a structure, but in fact, this is not necessarily true. After all, one reason we live here is because of the beautiful trees. So, here are the techniques you should employ.

ONE: Think in terms of zones. The first zone is around your house and driveway. In this zone trees should be thinned so crowns are not touching. Branches should not touch the house or overhang decks. All dead and diseased trees should be cut down and the slash removed. Trim all trees up 12 feet to remove ladder fuel that would allow fire on the ground to climb the tree. Cut tall grass and rake up and remove ground litter (pine cones and needles, sticks, highly flammable plants like juniper). Remove any pine needle drifts near the foundation of your house, decks and roofs. Stack wood 30' or more away from the house. If you have a wood shake roof- replace it. Think in terms of the fuel you are providing for the embers that are blown ahead of fires and that remain after the fire has passed - usually in about 40-60 seconds. The "wall of fire" may not burn down your house, but a lingering spark or ember that ignites pine needles by your house or on your deck will do the job nicely! Make sure your address is clearly shown at the end of the driveway.

TWO: Roads are natural fuel breaks. If these fuel breaks are widened, it is easier to stop fires. Again, widening does not mean clear-cutting. It means removing excess trees, trimming, and raking back about 15-20 feet from the road. This creates a "shaded fuel break." The final effect should be park like, with well-spaced trees and grassy ground cover. This not only helps slow or stop the fire but it protects your emergency access route. You'll see more deer, too!

THREE: Back to zones. Once you have created a Fire Wise zone around your house and along your driveway, expand that zone outward. Zone 2 can have higher density but the same principles apply. Zone 3, ditto. If you have trouble deciding which trees to cut, simply choose to keep the healthiest and prettiest from a stand. Remove slash and ground litter. Remove all dead and diseased trees. If you have trees touching or overhanging power lines call your utility company.

FOUR: Maintenance. After the initial hard push, do annual reviews and maintenance. Keep removing the excess fuel. Help your neighbor.

In communities that have committed to Fire Wise programs as many as 86% (sometimes more) of the houses can be saved; the unmitigated houses burn. You may be keeping your insurance rates down - or just keep your insurance - by mitigating.

The BMHOA has a resource library for you. We have a copy of the Evergreen Community Wildfire Prevention Plan and copies of our Colorado State Forest Service Stewardship Plan for Bear Mountain. We have Fire Wise materials or you can order them off the web. The Colorado State Forest Service has many resources they can send you and for a very modest fee they will send out a forester to help you assess your forest and set up a plan. We have a grant this year to help 20 homeowners with their mitigation and hope to get more help in the future.

Walk your property and think like a fire, that is, imagine the fuel opportunities on your property. Pick a small area and thin, trim and rake. You will be amazed at the difference you'll see in a short time.

Please call (303-674-6155) or e-mail (bmhoa@vahoo.com) the BMHOA if you have any questions.