

Help your community become wise about fire

Although the evidence is only anecdotal at this point, it seems that as autumn becomes drier, firefighters are making more calls each day for grass fires and controlled burns that have gotten out of hand.

Since large portions of the Highland Lakes remain wild and uninhabited, the threat of a fire starting and blazing unchecked remains a real risk. Yet there is also an unprecedented explosion of new settlements, and housing developments seem to be popping up all over what used to be the unblemished countryside. As more people build homes in these areas, the fire risk increases.

True, lightning has sparked many a forest fire, and volcanoes and other natural catalysts are also to blame, but there is no denying the presence of man always increases the potential for a disaster — including trash fires, burning back brush and so on.

Many of the great conflagrations that scorched Southern California, the western states and even South Florida not so long ago started this way.

No one wants to see the Highland Lakes experience such a calamity, but the potential clearly is there.

Luckily, the Texas Forest Service understands this potential for disaster and has helped develop a community-initiated program called Firewise Communities/USA, which allows rural residents to increase their chances of surviving a wildfire through a high level of fire readiness.

Those living in the numerous rural subdivisions dotting the Highland Lakes, as well as residents in any non-urban setting, would do well to avail themselves of this program.

Better safe than sorry.

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Tuesday, October 16, 2007 • Page 4

The members of Whitewater Springs subdivision did just that recently, and they have recently been recognized by Burnet County Judge Donna Klaeger as an official Firewise Community/USA, the first subdivision in Burnet County to attain this designation and only the 14th in the entire state.

As was noted in the column Nature Beckons in the Oct. 14 Sunday Tribune, Whitewater Springs residents, alarmed after watching national news about devastating wildfires across the country and alarmed by a drought gripping central Texas, saw themselves as potential victims of a similar calamity.

Rather than sit around and do nothing, several neighbors attended Texas Forest Service training and were certified as Citizen Wildfire Ecology Specialists when they finished. In turn, these residents figured out ways to organize the community and safeguard their subdivision.

As part of that approach, Texas Forest Service urban-wildland interface specialists made several recommendations after an on-site risk assessment.

The neighborhood group also partnered with The Bertram Volunteer Fire Department, which offered a "dry hydrant" to place in one of the community ponds to provide an easily accessible water source. Continuing the community interaction, firefighters also were provided with a large detailed map of the subdivision that included street signs and numbers, contact telephone numbers, and the locations of homes where residents with physical disabilities lived.

The Texas Forest Service strongly praised the community for their accomplishments, which now serve as a model for the entire region.

The Whitewater Springs subdivision, located off FM 1174 just a few miles north of RR 1431, has set a wonderful example for the Highland Lakes on how to be prepared for a fire.

Don't let them be the only ones.

For more information on how to help your community become Firewise, visit www.firewise.org/usa or <http://tex-astforests-service.tamu.edu/>