

Fire Mitigation Meeting
Summary
11 May 2022
Q&A with Chief Brian Oliver, BFRD Wildland
Division

Q: We've limbed up trees, removed junipers and pinyons and pine needles from our grassy areas, and lowered grass height around potential ladder fuels according to a rubric you gave us four years ago. In the wake of the Marshall and NCAR fires, in which grasses were heavily involved, should we be doing more to separate fuels?

A: The best practices we've been talking about for four years are still the best practices. The Marshall fire was an extreme event, a perfect storm of drought, wind, and fire resources scattered elsewhere at the time. While grasses were definitely the initial carrier of it, a catalyst, no structure was lost as a result of direct exposure to the grasses. Structures were lost only through exposure to somewhat larger fuels that had themselves been ignited by the grass. And once homes started to burn, they became the primary means of fire spread. The Marshall fire ceased to be a grass fire within 90 minutes.

Q: Does that mean grasses aren't important in fire mitigation?

A: Not at all. Good fire mitigation depends on different strategies working in concert. And any time you can reduce fuels, you've made your home and your neighborhood safer. But be aware that even if all the grassy areas were paved, it would still be possible for embers to land in unmitigated areas near homes. Grasses are just one element in the larger picture.

Q: So how would you prioritize our mitigation activities?

A: First, start inside your home. Make sure you have a Go bag packed, an evacuation plan, a communication plan with your family, know where you'll go, how you'll get your pets out, and be sure you've checked your insurance policy and itemized your belongings.

Next, address the three-foot area immediately outside your home. This is the most important place to remove anything combustible.

Then, maintain your home — mow your lawn, clean your gutters, remove leaf debris, get any light, flashy fuel away from the home. Where this sort of thing collects is also where embers will be directed by the wind.

From there, work out to trees and shrubs that could ignite and endanger your home or your neighbors' homes.

Q: What about deciduous shrubs and trees? Are they a fire risk?

A: They can be when they're dormant and dry. And when their leaves drop, those leaves become fuel. Many deciduous items burned in the Marshall and NCAR fires, because those fires happened in winter and early spring. Now that the whole year is fire season, these need to be considered, too, as significant ember generators.

Q: How about our dry split-rail fences? Aren't those dangerous?

A: Those fences will burn, but as long as they're not connected to houses and the area around them is kept clear of fuels, they're not of too much concern. Fences attached to homes are much more risky.

Q: How can we make fences attached to homes less risky?

A: Make sure there is a break between the fence and the house. That might be a steel gate or some metal flashing between the fence and the siding. These things will slow the progression of the fire and help give the fire department time to save your home.

Q: If I have fire resistant siding like stucco or fiber cement board, do I have to worry about an attached fence?

A: Those materials are a huge benefit, but what's under that siding is still a fire risk (e.g., plywood or OSB). If the fire has a way in, below the siding from close-in plantings or debris, through a soffit, through a garage door, trim, etc., the house will still burn. And fire resistant isn't fireproof; with enough radiant heat, fire resistant siding materials will also burn, as they did in the Marshall fire.

Q: The evacuation from the NCAR fire resulted in traffic jams. If it had been a Marshall-type event, people would have been trapped in their cars. What's being done about this?

A: Several years ago, emergency notifications were sent as reverse 911 calls via landline phones. More recently, notifications have been done via Everbridge, but that is an opt-in system, and not everyone has opted in.

As a result of spotty alerts in the Marshall fire evacuation, emergency services realized they needed a different system and put in place one similar to an Amber alert, a wireless emergency alert (WEA) in which a message goes out to all phones reachable by a given cell tower. The NCAR fire was the first time this was used, and to reach hikers on the mesa, it was sent to a wider area than strictly necessary, causing more people to evacuate than should have. This exacerbated the traffic congestion. Also, many people got the alert who were not at home, and they headed back into the evacuation zone to get pets and belongings.

Following the NCAR fire, emergency services is working to set up a new, more targeted system that will also give people real-time information about the fire and about traffic. This will give the police a better tool to more effectively facilitate traffic flow.