

Firesafe in the Interface

What You Can Do



by
Gary Roberts
District Fire Prevention Officer
Payson Ranger District
Tonto National Forest
USDA Forest Service



The Southwest is a semi-arid region that flexes between wetter periods and droughts of significant proportions. Public land agencies are sensitive to the need for recreation opportunities, but when wildfire danger is very high or extreme, the protection of lives, property, and natural resources holds precedence above all else.

When Americans work together for the common welfare, great things happen. Everyone stands to benefit when understanding and cooperation result in averting catastrophic fire. You can help public agencies by being their eyes and ears during high fire danger. Immediately report all wildfires, illegal campfires, trash burning, and careless cigarette use to the state police, sheriff's department, or land management agencies.

Respect and obey fire restrictions and closures. Be patient. In the total scheme of things, necessary restrictions and/or closures are usually relatively brief in duration and comprise little of a total calendar year.

Consider what you'd rather have. Several weeks of fire restrictions and/or closures or decades of the Mogollon Rim Country looking like a charred lunar landscape? Temporary economic interruption or long term financial blight? The burn areas of the 1990 Dude Fire, the 2002 Rodeo-Chediski Fire, the 2004 Willow Fire, and the 2005 Cave Creek Complex, all serve as a sobering visual reminder of what catastrophic fire can do. It takes at least 120 years for a ponderosa pine to grow to full maturity. And that's only if a catastrophic fire hasn't sterilized the soil. Think!

During high fire danger, smoke only in an enclosed vehicle or inside a building and never use your car window as an ashtray. Be extra careful with backyard grills. Clear all flammable material from your barbecue area and drown your charcoal with water after use.

As the population of Tonto Rim Country grows, more and more homes are being built in rural areas and on wooded slopes. A wildland/urban interface

zone is where the urban meets the rural. As land management agencies know all too well, this often results in conflict between rural and urban values, as well as expectations of how natural resources should be managed. From the vantage point of a firefighter, the interface is where combustible vegetation meets combustible homes. If you choose to live in a wild or forested setting, you need to know and understand that wildfire is not a possibility, but a probability. Wildfires occurred in Rim Country long before there were places like Payson, Pine, Strawberry, and Christopher Creek.

With the seclusion and ambience of a house in the forest comes the risk of living in a home that is surrounded by combustible vegetation. Despite the best intentions of the past, the Forest Service, and many segments of American society have made some big mistakes. Aggressive suppression of all wildfires during the latter half of the 20th century, as well as livestock grazing that began in 1870 and removed grasses that were necessary to carry low-to-mid intensity fires that cleansed the forest of dead-and-down debris and sickly trees, has resulted, in many cases, in thicker, denser stands of thinner, smaller trees where disease and insect outbreak are all too common.

The Payson Ranger District and the U.S. Forest Service have worked tenaciously since 2001 to reverse the current unhealthy condition of the Tonto National Forest in Rim Country and to reduce the risk of wildfire in our wildland/urban interface communities. The problem, however, wasn't created in a day and thus, will not be rectified in a day. The most important component, however, in making your life and property safe from wildfire is **YOU**.

In most situations, firefighters have the technology, equipment, and ability to effectively suppress wildfire. Three percent of the time, however, wildfires burn so intensely and chaotically that there is little firefighters can do. The ability to suppress a major catastrophic wildfire is limited.

If you have a home or property in Mogollon Rim Country, you are at risk. The best way to fight fire is before smoke is on the horizon. It is essential that you educate yourself about what you can do to reduce the risk and intensity of wildfire around your home and property and then **DO IT!**

###