UI Extension Forestry Information Series II
Fire No. 8

Do I Still Believe in Landscaping for Fire Prevention?

Ron Mahoney

On July 30, 2003, our Moscow Mountain home, shop, and 5-acre forest property burned to the ground in a human-caused wildfire that covered 200 acres and consumed 4 other homes.

It was 98 degrees that day, with about 5% humidity and a 10 mph wind when the fire started. We had done many of the things we advise in our popular publication "Protecting and Landscaping Homes in the Wildland/Urban Interface". We had a large area of gravel and well-tended grass around the home, a circular turnaround that could accommodate large trucks and fire engines, and had thinned and maintained most of our timbered 5-acres.

Since the fire, I have been asked many times if I still believed in these practices. My answer is an absolute YES. Here is why.

It gave us a chance. Initially, the fire approached our property burning into the wind. We were able to stop and hold it at the line along the lawn and gravel areas, using only a garden hose. Likely, the fire would have stopped on its own at those boundaries, as there was no additional fuel for over 100 feet and the light winds were blowing the heat back into the fire. At this point, a rural fire truck was also on site and the driver told me he would come back because he had adequate space to turn around quickly and escape if necessary. Our efforts had helped slow down the fire and gave firefighters and our neighbors a chance to save other homes and properties.

When the fire stopped at the edge of our defensible space, we thought we were safe. Then, just as the fire truck ran out of water, we heard a roar. The fire had jumped the road below us, and now came charging up the slope, this time with the wind. Trees, including some large pines pruned up to 30 feet, were exploding into flame eighty feet or so in front of the rapidly advancing fire. The heat was so intense that the fire ignited our buildings without any flame reaching them first. As this happened, I could see the fire-retardant tanker planes and helicopters with large bags of water suspended below approaching on the horizon.

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We were defensible, but the conditions that day didn't give the defenders enough time to save our home. However, our open spaces, thinned and pruned trees, and ability to halt the fire on its initial front, may have helped save our neighbor's home. I also believe that it gave the superb group of firefighters the small edge they needed to stop the fire at only 200 acres. We all feared it would consume all of Moscow Mountain and perhaps thousands of additional acres east of our area.

Under less severe conditions, I believe the fire hazard reduction measures we took would have saved our home. Under the conditions that day, the potential fire damage was only thwarted by the well-trained and equipped firefighters from local and state agencies, private forest industry, and logging companies that responded with incredible courage and skill.

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