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Brush fires a warning for area homeowners

JEFF DELONG

RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL

Posted: 3/28/2007

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With two homes destroyed by wind-whipped brush in 10 days, the Reno area appears to be in the midst of a dangerous fire season that either started early or never really stopped.

Northern Nevada residents must take this seriously, fire officials said Tuesday.

"It scares the hell out of me," Reno fire division chief Marty Scheuerman said. "We've had a fairly significant fire every month of this year, which is basically unheard of."

The latest incident was Monday afternoon, when a power line downed by severe wind sparked a fire in southwest Reno off Skyline Boulevard. Flames rocketed up a steep brushy slope and into homes near the intersection of Solari and Camill drives. One house was destroyed, and two sustained significant damage.

"It burned all around my house, all the way to the front door," said Ed Parco, whose home was to go on the market in a few days but suffered significant damage.

"We have a little delay now," Parco said Tuesday as he waited for an insurance company representative to inspect the damage.

Parco was at his newer home in Caughlin Ranch when he heard a fire was threatening the house he had lived in for 20 years.

"I got here just as the fire engines got here," he said. "The smoke was so thick I couldn't see 5 feet."

He had to make a quick decision to save either his cat, Princess, or his vintage

1953 Hudson convertible, valued at \$125,000.

"What's more important? My decision was the cat. Then I came back and got the car," Parco said.

Burning embers entered a vent and started his ceiling on fire. Others floated to beneath his pool deck, lighting it up.

Up the street, Blair Anderson also spent Tuesday inspecting damage to his home, including cracked windows, a destroyed pool shed and doghouse and burned fencing and landscaping.

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ANDY BARRON/RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL

Scorched land is left in the ravine behind the house that was destroyed by a fire Monday afternoon. Officials urge neighbors to clear land around their homes.



A utility worker repairs the damage to lines next to the house that was destroyed in Monday's fire.

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- For emergencies, call 911.
- For inspections in Reno, Truckee Meadows Fire Protection District, call 328-3650.
- Sierra Fire Protection District, call 849-2500.

"My swimming pool was baby blue yesterday. Now it's coal black," Anderson said. "The firemen said what saved us was the swimming pool."

The owner of the home destroyed by fire, Alice Hill, was staying with family Tuesday. A family member said she did not want to discuss her loss.

Brush should be removed

Parco said he routinely cleared brush at least 20 feet from his home and suspects that those efforts kept the damage from being far worse. Anderson said he's been worried about the amount of brush in the canyon downhill from his property.

"I believe if they had cleared that, it would not have burned right up to the house," Anderson said.

Anderson's concerns were probably well warranted, Scheuerman said. At the home destroyed in Monday's fire, as well as at the one burned to the ground by another brush fire in northwest Reno on March 17, brush was growing right up to the backyard fence, Scheuerman said.

With spring less than a week old and the region facing wildfire conditions more common in June or July, homeowners need to act now to clear brush and other flammable vegetation from around their homes, Scheuerman said. He recommends a ring of cleared space at least 30 feet wide, possibly more if the land is sloping. Nothing flammable should be allowed to grow beside a wooden fence.

"People think they've got plenty of time to clear their weeds before summer. They need to do it now, not wait," Scheuerman said. "It's up to the homeowner to protect their own property. They need to have a buffer."

If someone is concerned about brush buildup on a neighbor's property or on land where ownership is unclear, they can contact their local fire department, Scheuerman said. Inspectors can be dispatched and, if they deem the situation to be a hazard, require brush to be removed through a weed abatement process.

Another common threat is posed by piles of yard waste people often throw into gullies or other open land near their homes. One such pile of grass clippings and limbs was observed near Monday's fire, though Scheuerman couldn't say whether yard debris played a role in that particular blaze.

If a fire reaches such a pile, flames feed off a "fuel jackpot" that can substantially accelerate a fire's spread, Scheuerman said.

"And, usually, it's just as far as people can throw it over the fence, so it's not very far" from homes, Scheuerman said.

Ornamental plants can also be a danger. At the home that burned March 17 in northwest Reno, ornamental junipers in the yard caught fire and contributed to the structure's loss, fire officials said.

The two recent destructive fires in Reno were the latest in a string of unseasonable fires erupting across the region. Among them were a pair of blazes that burned more than 20 acres of brush in Palomino Valley and west of Pyramid Highway in early March. On Dec. 26, a rare midwinter blaze scorched up to 300 acres and threatened homes in the Sun Valley area.

Regional fire agencies are planning to gear up for wildfires on April 1 to levels normally reserved for summer, Scheuerman said.

"It's something that we have to deal with now," he said.

- Concerned about brush buildup on a neighbor's property or on land where ownership is unclear? Contact your local fire department.
- To tell the RGJ about overgrown ravines or other property: Watchdog@rgj.com; reporter Maggie O'Neill, 788-6597 or moneill@rgj.com.

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