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Neighbors wonder who is responsible for clearing brush

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The hillsides in the canyon behind Norma Havens' house are filled with golden desert grasses -- acres of kindling that could blaze up under the wrong circumstances.

From her perspective it's not scenic, it's a fire hazard.

"Last summer, the fire on Peavine (Peak) was not that far away," Havens said. "I was on the phone quite a bit during that fire because I was out of town. The question became should I jump on a plane and head home."

It's fire season again. Last Monday, a fire ripped through 15 to 20 acres of canyon lands in southwest Reno to destroy one home and damage two others.

"The last two weeks showed that any neighborhood is susceptible to what I consider brush fires," Havens said.

Havens said she wants one of two things to happen. Either her neighbors living along the canyon living on Britannia and Twin Creeks drives should work together to reduce the brush behind their houses, or the appropriate government agency should reduce the hazard. Just clearing the area behind her house won't make her feel safe, she said.

"If my neighbor doesn't do his part, I'm in just as much danger," Havens said.

Andrew List, executive director of the Fire Safe Council, said that the responsibility of clearing land of fire hazards is the responsibility of the property owner whether it is private property, city property, federal property or county property.

The Fire Safe Council has 60 chapters in the state made up of concerned property owners. The council works with the chapters to inform them of fire hazards, help them create defensible space and fuel breaks that make it difficult for fire to pass beyond a certain point.

"Where there's large-scale work to be done such as creating a fuel break, the Fire Safe Council has some grants available for member communities," List said.

Property owners who wish to find out if their area is threatened by wild fire can check the Web site www.livingwithfire.info. Every community in Nevada was evaluated in 2005-2006 for fire safety.



Norma Havens holds her yellow lab puppy Ellie Mae behind her house on Britannia Drive in northwest Reno. Havens hopes her neighbors will band together to create defensible space behind their homes after two Reno homes were lost recently in ravine brush fires. (TIM DUNN/RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL)

"I urge people to find the report for their community, determine what the risks are for their community and take action," List said.

Richard Brown, spokesman for the Bureau of Land Management, said every year government agencies implement their plans to reduce fire hazards on public property that poses a threat to humans or structures. Brown said concerned homeowners should call their local fire stations or Fire Safe chapter to find out what is being done in their area.

For those with flammable vegetation on their property, Reno Fire spokesman Steve Frady said they should remove all dead and dying vegetation a minimum of 30 feet around the building.

"If a home is on a ridge line on a slope the defensible space needs may increase from 30 feet to even 200 feet," Frady said.

Jeff Steckline, owner of Rock Solid Landscape, advises homeowners who want to rid themselves of a weedy field to book a landscaper early in the season because their schedules start filling up in April. By the middle of summer, it can be nearly impossible to find a landscaper with an opening.

"The market gets so competitive that landscapers start picking and choosing their jobs," Steckline said.

Larger areas will receive more of a discount, Steckline said, so it makes sense for neighbors to shop together.

He said it can take a crew of four to five workers a week to clear a heavily weeded acre, and, at a labor cost of \$40 per man and per hour it can be costly, but Steckline said his company focuses more on high end landscaping and rarely does that kind of work.

Steckline said thinning brush can be done without a landscaping license and there are other businesses that focus on such projects.

Hever Garcia, of El Reyo Landscape, said his company completes roughly 50 to 60 requests to clear brush in a season.

He said in acre of land where the weeds are moderate, a crew can clear the area with weed eaters and sprinkle the ground with preemergent herbicide for roughly \$300 to \$500 for an acre.