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Protecting home from wildland fire is owner's responsibility

Matt Farley (MFARLEY@RGJ.COM)

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Norb Szczurek, a 30-year firefighting veteran who refers to the first day of the Waterfall Fire as "the lowest point of my career," issued a wake-up call to a group of Nevada homeowners last week: In a wildland fire, the fate of your house is probably in your own hands.

"'Defensible space' is a term from the '70s," Szczurek, division chief of the North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District, told some 40 members of the Nevada Fire Safe Council during the group's annual meeting at the Plaza Hotel and Conference Center.

"They used to talk about making a space where firefighters could defend your house. The reality is, (in a large fire) there just aren't enough people to have firefighters at every single house. So I like to talk about home survivability, where your house can survive without us."

The NFSC was formed in 1999 with an eye toward helping citizens establish just that sort of self-contained fire safety, said Executive Director Andrew List. In nearly eight years, the group has grown to more than 3,500 members in 60 chapters across the state. Though each chapter works closely with local officials, most members have no formal fire training, List said.

"Most people are concerned about fire safety, but they don't know exactly how to address it," he said. "The council was formed to organize regular people and help them communicate."

The annual meeting last week brought together representatives of the various chapters to share strategies on issues ranging from fund raising to recruitment, List said. The 2007 session featured a talk by state Sen. Mark Amodei, as well as a trailer-mounted wildfire simulator run by the U.S. Forest Service.

The major theme this year -- and every year, organizers said -- was fuel mitigation.

"Everything in this area will burn at some point," said Ken Sullivan,

head of the NFSC's North Carson Chapter.

"It's just the sort of place we live in. For instance, the area around the Governor's Mansion seems fairly safe, but it isn't. With a good wind, a fire could race through that whole neighborhood. So you need to move the fuel away from structures."



Ruta Glinski, from right, and Steve Edgar, both with Bureau of Land Management, walk through a fire simulator April 19 with the help of Margaret Potvin, a volunteer with the Fire Education Program/San Bernardino National Forest. The instructional exhibit was on display at the Legislative Plaza. (LISA J. TOLDA/RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL)

Common denominator

The common factor in nearly all serious wildfires is dry brush and other flammable organic clutter, Sullivan said. His chapter encourages homeowners to keep their land clear by offering to haul away potential fuels after owners gather them up. Members also often walk the neighborhood with fire professionals, who point out likely hazards, he said.

Szczurek said widespread fuel mitigation could have dramatically reduced the damage done by the Waterfall Fire, which consumed 17 structures and more than 50 vehicles on 7,566 acres around Carson City in July of 2004. He recounted how the fast-moving blaze thwarted firefighters' efforts for days as it tore through forests and subdivisions with terrifying speed.

"We had five (firefighters) badly hurt, and two of them were mine," he said while showing a series of photographs taken during the incident. "Not a week goes by that we don't think about it."

Due to a rapid wind shift and a communications breakdown, Szczurek eventually found himself cut off from ground support in Levi Gulch as one arm of the fire bore down on the neighborhood, he said. As he raced through a back yard searching for some way to save the homes, he noticed that many homeowners had started clearing fuel before they had been evacuated. Unfortunately, the cleared vegetation remained near structures, stacked in potentially explosive piles.

"They started radioing for me to burn the yards," he said, referring to a strategy where firefighters deliberately burn vegetation in an area before a larger blaze can get to it. "So I got out my drip torch and started setting fires. Then I tried to soak (buildings) down with my thumb over the end of a garden hose."

Szczurek was able to hold the fire off long enough for help to arrive, sparing the neighborhood much of the damage that settled elsewhere. While several attendees attributed the positive result directly to Szczurek's decisive action, he said it was largely a matter of luck and preparation.

"We were able to corral that fire mainly because the weather changed," he said. "What I learned from that experience was to always expect the unexpected. People need to take these things into their own hands before there's a fire on the way."

Grant writing

The council's best tool in helping residents prepare is a program to help them write and manage fire prevention grants, List said. Since only registered nonprofit entities can accept certain grants, the NFSC often holds grant money while communities arrange to spend it on firebreaks or other features -- which the group usually helps design and build.

"The idea is that people don't need to be firefighters to make a difference," List said. "They just need to be concerned citizens who are willing to put in the time."

The NFSC has redoubled its prevention efforts in the face of the 2007 fire season, which is already shaping up to be a bad one, Szczurek said.

"The moisture index (for vegetation) right now is about where it usually is in August or September," he said. "That means there are a bunch of plants ready to burn."

A dry winter and a projected hot summer could combine for a fire season to rival 2006, Nevada's worst ever. More than 1.3 million acres burned in more than 1,245 separate incidents last year, according to the NFSC. The season has already begun in earnest with multiple blazes near Carson City and Reno.

And though they may be moving slowly, Northern Nevadans seem to be taking an interest in fire prevention, Szczurek said.

"One thing I can say is that the Waterfall Fire certainly heightened people's awareness," he said. "They're beginning to realize that you can't take anything for granted with fires."