

# Fire preparedness starts at home

## 'Think like an ember'

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When Tim Cashman first received the call to evacuate from Estes Park, he remembered the "four p's" of emergency response for wildfires — people, pets, personal belongings and papers.

"Those are the things you grab," Cashman said.

It was late October 2019 when Cashman, a former Gunnison resident, and his wife Lois raced to gather their things as one of the biggest fires on record in Colorado came within a few miles of their home.

"It was 3 p.m. in the afternoon but it looked like it was eight at night," said Cashman of the heavy smoke that surrounded the area.

The East Troublesome Fire near Estes Park burned approximately 193,812 acres. Fueled by wide-spread drought, dead and downed beetle-killed trees, high winds and dry conditions, the blaze stands out as an example of just how quickly a fire can grow to dangerous levels amid the impacts of climate change.

And while Cashman and

his wife were lucky enough to see their house spared, it was largely due to luck. A shift of wind and an early winter storm helped firefighters keep the burn at bay.

Gunnison County Emergency Manager Scott Morrill said dry, hot and windy conditions have put fires at the forefront of people's minds this year.

"It's incredibly dry out there with windy weather and dry temperatures," Morrill said. "It seems like it's getting progressively worse."

While Gunnison County has been lucky enough to evade evacuations from a larger burn such as the East Troublesome Fire, it doesn't mean the region is immune.

Morrill joined Gunnison County Commissioners to craft a resolution giving authority to the Gunnison County Sheriff to implement Stage 1 and 2 fire restrictions in the county. The aim is to streamline communications between federal, state and local agencies who exercise their jurisdictions over private and public lands. Morrill said the decision was a "good move" and would add clarity to what's been confusing communication.

Gallowich said county commissioners would be notified within hours of any fire restric-

tions put in place. The resolution would sunset at the end of the year, giving county leaders time to tweak elements for the following fire season.

"The desire is for us to be nimble, quick and responsive," said County Commissioner Jonathan Houck.

The streamlining of fire restrictions is just one way emergency planners in Gunnison County hope to avoid the close calls seen with those who live in areas more prone to wildfires.

"I really think it's important for homeowners and families to have a plan and talk and be prepared, have a go-bag available if you need to pick up and leave and you can take your essentials and hit the road," said Sam Pankratz of the Colorado State Forest Service.

In Colorado, people often reside in wildland areas, taking advantage of privacy, recreational opportunities and the surrounding beauty. As a result, homes are often located in what fire fighters refer to as the "wildland-urban interface."

Pankratz noted that this year in particular has experienced far below the normal amount of precipitation. That means protecting homes from wildfire should be a top priority.

According to Pankratz,

fires in Colorado have shown homes are not necessarily lost to large flames raging through the neighborhood — but from embers, or burning pieces of airborne wood and vegetation, that can be carried more than a mile through the wind and cause "spot fires" that ignite homes, debris and other objects.

With this knowledge in mind, Pankratz passed along a simple saying to help mitigate the effect of fires for homeowners: think like an ember.

To manage the effects of a forest fire near one's home, the National Fire Protection Agency suggests starting with the "immediate zone," or the house itself. This means addressing areas of the home which may be susceptible to fire danger, such as clogged roof gutters, missing shingles, loose window screens and any surrounding debris that could catch embers.

"We're always focused on life safety first," Pankratz said.

Morrill said those who live in areas more prone to wildfires should make sure they have a good plan in place if evacuations are required. He pointed to numerous fires where residents were forced to leave with little more than the clothes on their back.

"We were ready for some-

thing like this," Cashman said. He encouraged others in wildfire prone regions to develop a plan for what's important. "Thank God we did."

As fires become hotter and spread more quickly, Morrill said "people need to be ready to rock and roll."

Emergency response uses what's called a code red system to send critical communications to residents and business owners during emergencies. Resident information is put into a database to receive emergency mass notifications, otherwise known as reverse 911 calls.

"Don't question them, grab your stuff and head out," Morrill said, of code red messages.

"It was really scary," recalled Cashman of the East Troublesome Fire. "But it reminds you of what's really important — family, friends, and neighbors."

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