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College of Agriculture
and Natural Resources
Extension
Crook County

Saving Yourself; Fire 101

County Commissioners are an elected board that determines budgets, makes decisions about issues that affect citizens in the county, as well as oversee several county departments. The board directly governs several operations such as Road and Bridge, Fire Districts, and County Maintenance for entities such as the fairgrounds, library, public health, and the courthouse. Each department has a department head or manager that reports to the commissioners.

As such, the infrastructure of rural counties such as Crook County, do not have dedicated fire houses with professional firemen. Instead, there is one county fire department that is a wildland firefighting entity and fire zones. There are fire stations in Carlile, Aladdin, Beulah, and Oshoto. There are twelve county fire zones that operate on donations and assistance from the county. Within these districts are zone wardens who manage funds and equipment, and are responsible for making the call for help in the case of a fire. Under the zone wardens are the firefighters. These firefighters are generally regular citizens that live within the vicinity of a particular fire zone. They are volunteers and undergo annual trainings. So far for the year 74 volunteer firefighters have been trained in Crook County. Structure fires in the county are handled by the four community fire departments in Sundance, Moorcroft, Pine Haven, and Hulett, These stations house and operate county fire trucks. The fire stations are unmanned and only activated when a fire or emergency call is made. The volunteers at these stations are trained in firefighting and basic first aid and you will know them with the firefighting badge of distinction on their license plate.

This year has already seen several sizeable fires in the county. It has been a very dry year and that means a threat of a bad fire season. However, whether it's a dry year or not, there are still many good tips for protecting yourself, land, and buildings from fire. Homeowners should be aware of where the closest fire station is and who to contact in case of fire. Call 911 first and they will dispatch the call.

Additionally, consider the location of your land and home. University of Wyoming Extension has a tremendous publication entitled, "Living with Wildfire in Wyoming" that can be picked up at the local Extension Office or found at barnyardsandbackyards.com. If you are living on land with a cistern, will you have enough water to squelch a fire? Will your well pump have enough pressure to sustain a fire hose? How close is a water tap? Is there an approach or turn around big enough for a fire truck? There needs to be a 45 foot turn around area and pullouts large enough

for emergency vehicles. Fire trucks may not be able to climb steep slopes fully loaded, or cross bridges. Bridges should have weight limits posted and be able to support 18 tons or more.

Crook County has a plethora of vegetation and forest that make for prime fire hazards. Building a dream home with the beautiful Black Hills as a backdrop is a popular option. However, it also creates a substantial fire risk. As a homeowner, there are mitigation steps you can take to at least minimize threat to houses and buildings. Practicing fire reduction measures such as creating fuel breaks along roadways, which is the removal of all vegetation materials ten feet wide, as well as live brush and trees, will help slow fire. Creating fire zones around buildings, which means having thirty feet of clear space from all structures, is a must. A second zone seventy feet from all structures is another safety step. Again, there are many resources published about protecting against fires. Check out Barnyards Backyards and publications on the University of Wyoming Extension website.

Another responsibility of land and homeowners is to pay attention and adhere to fire bans. The fire ban information can be found on the Crook County website at www.crookcounty.wy.gov under departments and then under volunteer fire. The County Commissioners enact a fire ban when conditions are ripe for fires such as dry, hot, windy, drought, etc. **This means do not burn.** Anything. Don't burn fire pits, fire pits with screens, burn barrels, weeds, slash piles, camp fires, fireworks; anything that can produce a spark or ember. Do not flick cigarettes out the window of your car on the road, make sure your vehicle isn't dragging a chain, or throwing sparks from a flat tire that you are trying to make it to town on. When target practicing, make sure you aren't creating sparks that can ignite dry grass. Sure, there things in nature that can start a fire, but a lot of people's mistakes and carelessness, cause avoidable damage.

The County Commissioners may be a group you have a grievance with, but they have the counties' best interests at heart. Listen to their recommendations or it could cost you; in more ways than one. If found liable for starting a fire you can be held responsible for costs incurred for fighting the fire including: man power, county costs, landowner claims, power poles, fence replacement cost, and more. In addition you can be fined for willfully disobeying a fire ban.

Fire may be inevitable but there are steps to reduce the danger to homes, buildings, and people. In the words of the wise Smokey Bear, "Only you can prevent wildfires". This phrase is so much more than just a slogan, it's an important way to care for the world around you.