



## Stopping the fires on our doorsteps

**Your Turn** Karen Austin

Guest columnist

More than 100 fires are burning in the western

U.S. and over 4,350,558 acres have burned so far . More than 500,000 people in Oregon were under evacuation orders, as unprecedented acres of wildfires

race across forests, as of Sept. 10 .

Climate change has been a key factor in increasing the risk and extent of wildfires in the western United States. The risk of wildfire depends on factors such as temperature, soil moisture and the presence of trees, shrubs and other fuels. These factors have strong ties to climate change.

I live with my family on a ridge in south Eugene, surrounded by acres of forests. We are privileged to live here. We love the trees and wildlife, but it comes with an emotional cost for me. I dread the potential for wildfires every summer, until the rains begin in earnest.

A year and a half ago I confronted my fear and contacted a fire suppression coordinator with the Oregon Department of Forestry and asked him to speak to a group of neighbors. He accepted and did an excellent job of explaining fire behavior and the benefits of maintaining vegetation around homes to reduce the risk of fire to a group of neighbors. He recommended the

Firewise USA program as a good educational program. The good news is that management of one's home and yard can really reduce the risk of one's house burning down. This program suggests to start with making one's house less flammable (remove flammable material from roof, gutters and more) and managing vegetation in the zone within five feet of your home, then working outward. Both the house and the landscape adjacent to it play a critical role

in homes surviving a wildfire .

To maintain a defensible space (the area between a house and an oncoming wildfire, where the vegetation has been modified to reduce the wildfire threat), it starts with 'fuel ladders.' The term fuel ladder refers to live and dead vegetation that can allow fire to climb from

ground-level vegetation into the tree canopy . Most wildfires will not reach the crown of a tree if the vertical fuel is not continuous. When fire climbs a fuel ladder and reaches the crown of a tree it gains heat intensity and can more easily ignite surrounding vegetation and structures. Removing ladder fuel involves pruning the lower branches on trees, and trimming or

removing vegetation growing under trees . Removing trees to increase spacing between remaining trees can also reduce the intensity of a fire and can reduce plant competition for soil moisture and nutrients, leaving a healthier forest. Other important management actions that can decrease fire risk include trimming weeds and grass next to roads before vegetation dries out and avoiding the use of power tools with metal blades on dry vegetation during the fire season.

Since learning about lowering fire risk, my husband and I hired an arborist to remove and prune trees and spent hours removing fuel ladders, reducing the density of trees and shrubs and mowing grass and weeds. We still have work to do before we feel that we've managed our forested lot and yard to a comfortable level. Several other attendees of the talk last spring have managed their yards in ways that could significantly reduce the fire risk on their property.

If you live in or near forests check out the

Firewise USA website . Please consider reducing the risk of fire on your property. Let your neighbors know about this program. Contact a fire reduction specialist at OSU Extension with questions (<https://extension.oregonstate.edu>; 541-344-5859).

Consider reducing your carbon emissions and encouraging politicians to take actions that stop funding fossil fuel companies to reduce the effects of climate change on our planet. Reducing wildfire risk and moving into a future without fossil fuels require strong community efforts. We're all in this together.

*Karen Austin lives in south Eugene.*

