

Family takes personal steps reducing fire risk in unprotected area

Recently, on a trip to Eastern Oregon with Gordon Foster from the Oregon Department of Forestry, I met Steve and Bonnie Lofton, a retired couple who are a great example of how homeowners living in the wildland interface or rural areas may increase their chances of surviving a wildfire.

The Loftons live in sparsely populated Wheeler county, a world dominated by vistas, blue skies and fresh air. However, they also live without any form of fire protection. "I'm very scared of fire," confesses Steve. "Before we built, we made sure we had water."

The Loftons also acted on advice they received about creating defensible space around their home to reduce fire risk and increase their chances of surviving a wildfire. Upon first meeting Bonnie Lofton she proudly proclaimed, "We did what you told us to do. We've been clearing away the Juniper and cleaning up the brush around our home."

The Loftons' efforts to reduce risk and increase their chances of surviving a wildfire include:

Water:

- They maintain a 2500 gallon tank by the well above their home.
- They catch rain water and keep two 1200 gallon tanks under the house.
- Pumps with hoses are ready.

Structure:

- They built a log home because they are less likely to ignite.
- They have a non-combustible metal roof.
- All soffits are fully enclosed so combustible materials cannot accumulate.
- The porch surrounding the house sits high above the ground and is cleared of any stored or combustible materials.

Defensible space:

The Loftons attended a seminar and learned how Juniper can deplete their water supply and damages the stability of their steep terrain. Their property is covered with mounds of downed juniper away from the main house with much of it destined to become firewood. The other debris will fill in an eroding gully to stabilize the soil.

Other:

The Loftons have their own Pulaski fire tool.

Future:

- The Loftons plan to maintain a tank of water with wet gunnysacks. Steve Lofton describes growing up in a ranching community in the nearby Twickenham area and seeing his father tame fires with them.
- A natural spring on the property will contribute to a future pond – more water!
- Vehicle access is a problem. There is only one way in and one way out on their steeply graded road. Steve would like to obtain a fire truck for the community and maintain it on his property.
- There is talk of developing a fire department or rangeland association.

The Lofton family exhibits wisdom in their pioneering spirit and have set an example for their remote community by taking proactive steps to increase the survivability of their home and other structures in case of a wildfire.