



Couple embraces fire preparedness

Pair feels more secure after defensible space work

By Terri Harber
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Terry and Teresa Tussey said they were relieved when they returned to their McDowell Road home Tuesday morning to find their property untouched by the Linehan Complex fire.

As veterans of California hillside blazes and floods, the couple knew what to do if the threat of fire or flood was imminent — leave.

In this case, they knew they'd done all they could.

“He had done everything possible to make his home safe,” said Meri McEneny, a fire-grant assistant with University of Nevada Reno Cooperative Extension. “If anything, we were out there admiring what he'd done.”

Tussey, a gunsmith by trade, also had been a volunteer firefighter years before. He knew it was important to be prepared and, last year, when he saw a story in the Nevada Appeal about how the Nevada Fire Safe Council was offering free evaluations of property for fire safety, he decided to have someone come take a look at his North Carson property.

The firefighting rule of people first, property next also is the council's credo. They offer tips on how to evacuate as well as how to make one's property less vulnerable to fire. On Monday night, the Tusseys didn't take any chances.

The smoke “was getting thicker and thicker and we could see flames above the hill,” Teresa Tussey said. It was 6 p.m. Monday and there were no firefighters or fire trucks there at that time and “it was evident it was spreading and not under control anytime soon.”

The couple didn't “want to be a burden to others,” said Terry Tussey, 66, who was injured in a mountain bike accident last year and ended up a paraplegic. Rather than wait until the fire might have come dangerously close to their home and requiring help to evacuate, the couple decided to leave well in advance of any potential danger.

“It would have taken three guys to move me and my wheelchair,” Tussey said. “We evaluated the situation. It didn’t make sense to stay.”

So the couple spent the night in a local motel and went back home Tuesday morning. Some of the safer aspects of the Tusseys’ property were in place when the couple moved in seven years ago. The house is made from flame-retardant materials, for example, and much of the wooden trim is fireproof or plaster covered. Their large gravel driveway goes all the way around their home so firefighters can work from all angles.

“Most homes only allow firefighters to work from the front,” he said. There aren’t very many plants close to the house. Defensible space of at least 150 feet and, in some sections, 300 feet, is left before sagebrush starts. And these plants are thinned, but not completely removed, to minimize flammability while also keeping the soil from eroding.

The term “defensible space” refers to the area between a house and an oncoming wildfire where the vegetation has been managed to reduce the wildfire threat and allow firefighters to safely defend the house.

Tips for creating defensible space

McEneny suggested residents who haven’t prepared for fire season yet at least answer the following questions. In many cases, the amount of separation between plants and shrubs should be at least double their height, and trees at least 10 feet between their canopies, she said.

- Is dead vegetation cleared within the recommended defensible space area of up to 200 feet, depending on the grade and type of vegetation?
- Is there ample separation between shrubs?
- Is flammable vegetation low to the ground that can spread fire to trees and, in turn, structures, eliminated?
- Is there a “lean, clean and green” area extending at least 30 feet from the house? Are plants irrigated, healthy and not crowded together in this area between wildland vegetation and the home itself?
- Is there a noncombustible area within 3 feet of the house?
- Is there plenty of separation between trees?

For tips on how to make your home more fire safe, how to evacuate a fire area, or to learn more about the Nevada Fire Safe Council, call 887-2252 or look at these two Web sites: www.nfsc.org and livingwithfire.info.

For your information

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