Smoke is in the air. News stories tell of continued dry spring weather and wildfires burning thousands of acres of land. Firefighters and homes are at risk. Now is the time to assess your risk of wildfire and take precautions that could save your life, your livelihood and your home.

As Osceola County has grown, many new developments lie at the rural - urban interface. This is the area that residents enjoy feeling the openness of the country while taking advantage of some of the services of the city. As the developments build up, lots are often adjacent to ranch and woodlands or vacant wooded lots. These are the areas most vulnerable to wildfires.

In the rural - urban interface, pine lands, prairie and dry grass lands have lots of fuel to feed wildfires. Dried leaves, pine needles, dead wood and logs all serve as fuel. Many of our native plants contain oils and resins that burn easily when fires are present so even some kinds of green plants that are alive and healthy can provide fuel.

In addition, wood siding, decks, porches, fences and roofing may also serve as fuel if fires burn nearby. Fire wood piles, storage buildings, propane tanks for grills are other fuel sources.

The Florida Department of Agriculture's Division of Forestry has prepared a series of fact sheets, videos and educational resources to help you learn what you can do to reduce your risk from wildfires. The FIREWISE Florida campaign is designed to help those with homes, barns and businesses in the wildland - urban interface understand the importance of fire for the natural environments that we enjoy but also how to prevent wildfire from damaging our structures and our sense of security. It helps developers understand risks as they plan new communities and build more fire resistant structures, by selecting different building materials.

One key principle is that residents must take some responsibility for protecting their homes by developing a defensible space around structures. This means keeping fuel loads low at least 30 feet from the house. Remove natural wood chip, pine needle or leaf mulch from this zone. Remove highly flammable low growing vegetation and remove limbs of trees that are less than 10 feet from the ground to reduce the chance of fire laddering up the tree to the canopy where it can jump easily from tree to tree.

Many native plants are recommended for FIREWISE landscapes within the defensible space. Natives selected for the suitable location should be very drought tolerant, however, if you have grasss and landscape plants in this 30 ft zone, be sure they are well watered during high risk times. This may sound contrary to all water restrictions, but during extreme fire danger, you will need to make some hard choices to protect yourself and your investment.

Keep roof and gutters clear of pine needles and leaves. Be careful if you or family members get on to the roof. You don't want to become a casualty while trying to prevent a disaster!

Don't use wood fences within the defensible space. Locate wood piles at least 30' from the home or buildings. Don't store combustibles such as gasoline for the mower or paint thinners in or near valuable structures. Old tires and trash should be hauled to the landfill.

Be especially careful of fire in outdoor grills. Note that automobile catalytic converters are so hot they can ignite dry grass and start a fire. Don't park or leave the car running on dry grass. Occasionally,
glass bottles can focus sunlight like a magnifying glass and start a fire, so be sure litter is picked up from the yard or nearby fields and road sides.

Have garden hoses hooked up to an outside water supply. It provides an additional water source should fires approach. Many of the natural swamps, creeks and ponds used to fill tanker trucks are empty in dry weather. Your water may be the only water available.

When law enforcement officials advise you to evacuate, don't hesitate. You will not have time to prepare. Instead, prepare now. Have important papers handy. Have a video or paper inventory of valuable belongings. You may have a copy in a safe deposit box, but also send a copy to a relative out of state for safe keeping. Put together a family plan so you know what needs to be gathered when you go to a friend's house or shelter to make your stay more comfortable.

Information on preparing for fires and other disasters is available through the UF/IFAS Osceola County Extension office. Call (321) 697-3000 to get a packet of information or to request an educational program in your area.

If your property is at risk for wildfire, take precautions in your yard to save your landscape and your home. Your neighborhood and the fire fighters will thank you.

REDUCE YOUR RISK

- Develop a 30-foot defensible space around structures.
- Remove natural wood chip, pine needle or leaf mulch and flammable low-growing vegetation and limbs from this zone.
- Keep grass and landscape plants in this 30-foot zone well watered during high-risk times.
- Keep roof and gutters clear of pine needles leaves.
- Don't use wood fences or put piles of wood within the defensible space.
- Don't store combustibles such as gasoline or paint thinners in or near valuable structures.
- Be especially careful of fire in outdoor grills.
- Don't park or leave the car running on dry grass.
- Have hoses hooked to an outside water supply.
- Be prepared to evacuate and have a family plan in place to do so.

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