

Big Elk Fire Sends Wake-Up Call

WHEN VOLUNTEER HOLLY COYLE offered Estes Park, Colorado homeowners information about how to protect their homes from wildfire in this mountain community, she was surprised to learn that some people actually christen their plants.

“I can’t cut down Mother Juniper,” one elderly woman told her.

For Coyle and her five-member team, changing perspectives became the major challenge in the summer of 2002.

“A lot of people know about defensible space,” said Coyle, an environmental sciences and forestry major in school. “But that doesn’t mean they want to cut down a tree in their yard or even know how much they should cut back.”

Coyle is a member of the Student Conservation Association (SCA) Fire Education Corps—a national program made up of college-aged volunteers specially trained to teach people how to create defensible space around their homes and, when possible, to help them do the work.

And when homeowners are resistant to cutting vegetation away from their homes, volunteers like Coyle are taught to come up with creative solutions.

“Instead of slashing the tree, we treated ‘Mother Juniper’ as if it was an individual structure—creating a 30-foot defensible space around it,” she said. The team placed rock barriers around the tree and swept up pine needles that had accumulated beneath it.

When SCA members do an evaluation, they begin by looking at the home’s risks and vulnerabilities.

“We go over a checklist with the homeowner that covers things such as clearing out heavy fuels 30 to 100 feet from the home, fire truck access, and what type of roofing the homeowner has,” said Jenna Messmer, an SCA public information intern.

Then they provide homeowners with suggestions about how to reduce those risks. Most involve some kind of action—such as cleaning up dead pine needles or removing dead vegetation next to the home. Suggestions can include structural changes as well, such as installing a non-flammable roof.

Though the program is free and voluntary, not everyone readily embraces suggested changes. In the case of one community, it took a fire close to home to get residents’ attention.

Lessons by fire

In July 2002, the situation in Estes Park and vicinity changed dramatically when the

Alison Eckberg of the Student Conservation Association goes over the checklist for Bob Clark’s property in Estes Park



4,000-acre Big Elk Fire erupted 10 miles southeast of town.

As local officials evacuated the Little Valley and Big Elk Meadows subdivisions, firefighters from the Big Elk and Estes Park volunteer fire departments quickly assessed structures and surrounding landscapes to determine whether or not each home could survive the fire.

According to Estes Park Fire Chief Scott Dorman, homes with defensible space around them earned green flags posted prominently in driveways. Red flags were given to those properties without defensible space.

Jerry Guthrie, chief of the Big Elk Meadows Volunteer Fire Department, said the purpose of this type of sweep is to make sure firefighters don't waste valuable time and resources trying to save a house that is fundamentally indefensible.

Guthrie and his colleagues were not shy in telling residents why their homes were given red flags. The bad news left many in a state of shock.

Not one house was lost in the Big Elk Fire. But the fact that 70 percent of the homes in the subdivisions were tagged with red flags indicated to Dorman that mitigation measures were badly needed.

As the flames died down, residents streamed through the Estes Park Volunteer Fire Station wanting to find out what they could do to keep from getting red-flagged the next time. The SCA team was ready to help.

According to Coyle, the Estes Park community mantra became, "We don't want our home to burn. We don't want a red tag on our home. We want you to come out and we'll do anything you say for us to do."

SCA's phone rang off the hook, and Dorman's department—working closely with SCA—attended homeowners' meetings giving defensible space presentations throughout the summer. By the end of August, the SCA team had evaluated 164 homes.

The evaluation

Estes Park homeowner Bob Clark was one of those who called.

"We had the Big Elk Fire right behind us, just four or five miles over the ridge," Clark said.

Like many homeowners, Clark didn't know how much he should cut back and he was concerned about his roof.

"I thought they'd jump all over the fact that I have a cedar roof," he confessed when Coyle and Messmer visited his home. Clark told them he was thinking of replacing it with one made out of asphalt.

"Metal is actually best," Messmer quickly explained. "It lasts longer and it's even more fire resistant than asphalt."

Messmer and her team carefully went through a checklist of short- and long-term improvements Clark could make to create defensible space, such as cutting branches away from woodpiles or clearing pine needles from the gutter and from under porches. Long-term projects included thinning out a grove of small trees.

As part of the evaluation, Clark's street address was entered into a computerized mapping system that would tell Estes Park firefighters which homes had been evaluated. Once recommended improvements were made, an SCA volunteer would enter the new information into the system.

"You build your home in an area like Estes Park and you want to keep the trees because they are one of the reasons you moved up here in the first place," Clark said. "SCA helps you find the small things you can do to protect your home and keep the aesthetics."

Bringing in a team

Scott Sticha, the Rocky Mountain National Park fire mitigation officer in Estes Park, served as community coordinator for the SCA program in 2002.

"The Big Elk Fire was a wake-up call to this community," Sticha said. "The message about defensible space was so important. I never would have been able to do that kind of outreach without SCA."

Bringing an SCA team into a community can be costly. For a five-member team fully trained in wildland/urban interface concepts, with two vehicles, technology, housing and stipends, a community is looking at \$85,000 for one summer.

“This may sound like a lot for a community to spend, but if you compare that to the millions of tax dollars spent daily fighting wildland fires, we’re a very cost effective group,” said Jody Handly, SCA fire education corps program director.

“Some communities may not have the financial resources, but they can provide housing, vehicles, office space or other amenities,” Handly said. “The real qualification is need and the willingness to work with us.”

Agencies that have supported teams in the past include the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, National

Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, Idaho Department of Lands, Idaho Resource Conservation and Development Councils, Anchorage Fire Department and Colorado State Forest Service. Funding for the Estes Park effort was provided by the U.S. Department of Interior.

She said grant monies are often available to fund an SCA team. She works with community coordinators to help find ways to pay for a team, either by securing grants or finding a partner willing to share costs.

“I don’t turn communities away for not having the money,” Handly said. “We work with them to try and locate supporting partners.”

Communities interested in sponsoring an SCA team in their area can apply online with the Fire Education Corps at www.thesca.org. ■



The SCA team with homeowner Bob Clark