

Green Badge of Honor

More about the Big Elk Fire and home triage

UP IN COLORADO'S LITTLE VALLEY AND BIG ELK MEADOWS SUBDIVISIONS, residents kept green ribbons tied to trees in front of their houses for months as proof that their homes had passed the brutal triage that took place during the Big Elk Fire in July 2002.

"The green ribbon was like a badge of honor for people whose property was deemed defensible," said Estes Park Fire Chief Scott Dorman. "When we go through a neighborhood threatened by wildland fire, we make rapid decisions on whether we think a house is defensible or not."

Justin Dombrowski, wildland fire management officer for Boulder, Colorado, explained the firefighters' perspective.

"Basically, firefighters scout for a place to take a stand against the fire," he said. "When you talk about firefighters taking a stand, you can't take any chances. Firefighters look for fire-resistant home construction and spatial openings around a house where they can survive in that spot. We have to look at access and what kind of safety zones are available."

Despite Dorman's years of preaching defensible space to the community, and much to the dismay of many residents, 70 percent of the homes in Little Valley and Big Elk Meadows earned red flags during the triage. A red flag meant the home was not deemed defensible and that the fire department would not devote any resources to defend it.

During the triage, firefighters looked for several things to determine whether the house would get a red or green flag. The distance of the vegetation from the home, the composition of the roof and the slope of the property all were major factors in deciding whether it could be saved.

"We also looked at the density of the vegetation, the structure of the house and whether there was accessibility for fire trucks," Dorman said.

When there is a gentle slope to the property, there can be a distance of 30 feet between vegetation and the house. The steeper the slope, the further away the vegetation

needs to be. Other considerations include water availability and the kind of fire that is moving toward the property. All of these variables must be calculated within seconds as fire crews make their rapid assessments.

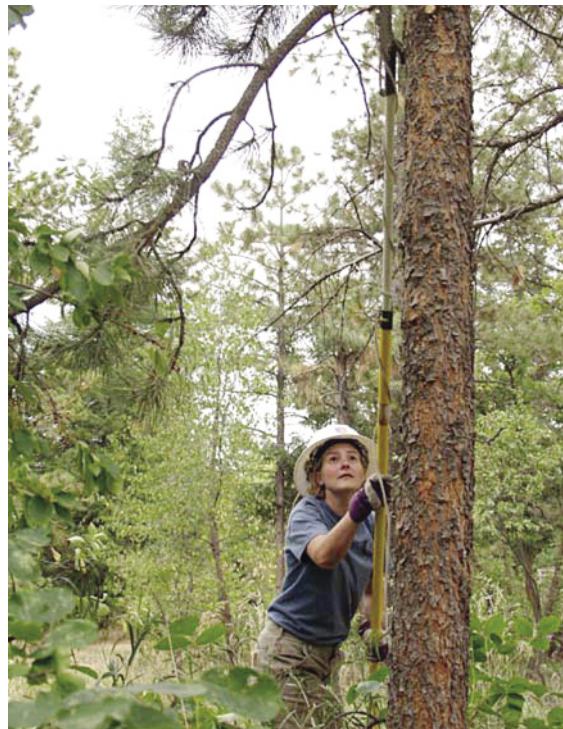
If a property fails just one of the criteria, it is usually red flagged. "Sometimes a special hazard also qualifies a home for a red flag," said Dorman. In one case, a property was red flagged during the Big Elk Fire because it had 18 fifty-five-gallon barrels of lacquer stored there.

Although not a single house burned in the Big Elk Fire, for days and weeks following the blaze residents streamed through the Estes Park Volunteer Fire Station to find out what they could do to keep from earning a red flag next time. "We've given a lot of advice to residents on what makes a good defensible space," Dorman said.

As time passes, Dorman is concerned that Estes Park residents may again grow indifferent to wildfire mitigation. That's why he and his crew were hard at work preaching the mitigation message even before the last green ribbon was taken down. ■



Justin Dombrowski, Wildland Fire Management Officer, city of Boulder



SCA member Emily Moss limbs a tree in Estes Park