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Tahoe fire a wake-up call for Idaho

Heath Druzin, The Idaho Statesman, Boise

Jul. 2--David Olson got the call he was dreading last week. The man who rents Olson's cabin in South Lake Tahoe, Calif., told him an out-of-control forest fire was bearing down on his subdivision and the street was being evacuated.

Olson immediately thought of the stand of pine trees he had been meaning to trim to reduce fire danger. And he knows about the importance of proper home maintenance in fire country -- he's worked as a wildland firefighter and fire information officer for more than 30 years and is now a spokesman with the Boise National Forest.

Olson's cabin was spared, but he says it's an opportunity to remind homeowners in fire country -- and much of Idaho falls into that category -- about the need to protect their homes now, not later.

"To me it was, once again, lessons learned, which I find somewhat ironic for someone in my position," he said.

It's a lesson that may be especially pressing in Idaho this year, with rangelands and forests drying out weeks ahead of time and a long-term drought continuing to take its toll, Boise National Forest fire manager Guy Pence said.

With Independence Day on Wednesday, Pence stressed that it is illegal to set off fireworks on public lands, including national forest and Bureau of Land Management territory.

The Fourth of July, Pence said, "makes us nervous as the dickens."

The wildfire in South Lake Tahoe that threatened Olson's house destroyed more than 250 homes, a vivid reminder of the dangers of living in what fire managers call the wildland-urban interface -- homes built on the edge of combustible forests and rangeland.

People who lost their homes and belongings were allowed to briefly return to their burned-out neighborhoods Friday, the same day authorities determined that an illegal campfire had sparked the blaze.

A 19.4-square-mile blaze north of Los Angeles last week has destroyed 12 homes.

A small wildfire Wednesday in the Terrace Lakes subdivision in rural Boise County could have wrought significant destruction had firefighters not quickly contained it, Pence said.

For the past several years, the subdivision has been offering free pickup of the debris to encouraging residents to clear brush around their homes to reduce danger, said Jim Tisdale, chairman of the Terrace Lakes Property Owners Association's health and safety committee.

"If you watch what happened in Lake Tahoe, I thought, 'Oh, my God, that could be us,' " he said.

Programs like that are crucial because homeowners, not fire crews and forest managers, are responsible for protecting their homes against wildfires, Pence said. Homeowners who don't protect their homes are putting more than just their property at risk.

"Some people say, 'Well, I'm willing to take the risk,' " Pence said. "If that were truly just your risk, that might be an acceptable statement to say, but if there are other people around you, you are also risking their homes and, if

firefighters show up, you are risking their lives."

This year's extreme fire danger extends to the rolling grassland of the Boise Foothills, an area that suffered a devastating wildfire in 1996, BLM spokeswoman Jessica Gardetto said. On June 21 a Northwest Boise house fire spread to a hillside and burned 8 acres.

Gardetto said the Foothills have dried out a month early and that it won't take much to ignite a blaze.

She said the precautions homeowners in the mountains take are the same Foothills dwellers should take -- keep lawns green, trim tree branches to give fires less fuel and clean up underbrush around your home.

"The main thing we tell people is lean, green and clean," she said.

Foothills residents are nervous about the conditions, said Paul Werner, president of the Central Foothills Neighborhood Association.

Werner, whose association covers a swath of Boise north of Hill Road, recently joined with neighbors to trim cheatgrass around their houses and clean up underbrush.

Werner said he's simply being a good neighbor.

"We're all in this together," he said.

The Associated Press contributed to this report

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