

COLUMNS

Notes From SEFD: Are We Ready?



by Eddie McArthur

March 7, 2025

The old West, at least as portrayed in movies, thrived on independence. Everyone took care of themselves. Help was nowhere to be found. In today's very fire-prone West that no longer works. If my home burns, it puts my neighbors' homes at risk. Fire safety practices, or the lack of them, affect all of us.

Recently our communities have seen everything from a home lost to fire, to an RV lost, to a dumpster fire at the landfill. Our largest wildfire in 2024 was in October. Wildland fire is the primary threat in our area, and the local fire that took several homes, the Encino fire, began as a wildland fire. Most homes that burn in these types of fires burn from the inside out, with embers entering the home igniting the home fire. Most also have combustible fuel near the homes.

How prepared are you to deal with a fire emergency? As I sit writing this on February 11, we've had winds in the mid 20's gusting into the mid 30's much of the day. Everything is dry, dry, dry. There is no "fire season" anymore, and today is scary. So: are you—are we—ready?

Fire safety starts outside the home. Among the first things to consider is a defensible space around your home. Keep combustibles at least 30 feet away from buildings. No storing firewood against the garage. Keep grass and other vegetation mowed and trimmed. Trim trees up at least six feet from the ground. Pick up a "Ready-Set-Go" pamphlet at the fire station for specific suggestions. [Sonoita-Elgin Fire District](#) will gladly conduct a free "Ready-Set-Go" or firewise review of your property and make suggestions for improvements. Call the non-emergency number, 520-455-5854, to schedule.

Maintain electrical systems and have them checked, especially in older homes. Have chimneys and dryer vents cleaned at least once a year. Seal openings where embers might enter the home: think about under decks and eaves, around doors and windows.

When building or remodeling, use fire resistant materials. Use fire resistant barriers in attics and crawl spaces. Consider a home sprinkler system. Store your important documents in a fireproof safe and keep digital copies in the cloud. Have a supply of water, and keep a long hose handy. If you have a water storage tank, quick-connect fittings of the size usable to firefighters are available through the fire district.

Create fire breaks, like a wide gravel drive to slow the spread of fire. If you have a locked gate, be sure the fire department and sheriff's department have the codes. The Community Connect system (see communityconnect.io/info/az-sonoitaelgin) gives you a place to register, list family members, special needs, gate codes, etc. We all need to get registered.

If a fire threatens or starts in your home, then what? Have medications stored in a place you can quickly access. Consider a go bag with changes of clothes, toiletries, extra chargers for electronics, etc. Call 911 as soon as you can do so safely. Don't assume someone else has called. If you have elderly or disabled members of your household, assist them. And: get out. Better to leave early than be unable to leave.

Pets are family members to many of us. Can you load them into your vehicle quickly? Do you have cat carriers that are accessible? Can you get your cats into a carrier? Do you have large animals? Do you have trailer(s) adequate for all? Will your horses load in a trailer readily? Will they load at night? Have they ever seen you with a flashlight or headlamp? Have a plan and practice it. If you evacuate, where will you go? As a last resort, write your name and phone number on your horse's side with a sharpie and open your gates.

Panic is your enemy in any emergency. Try to stay calm. Having a plan helps with that.

As a community, we have no official emergency plan for a large fire or any other catastrophe. We need a small group of dedicated people to undertake the challenge of creating a community emergency plan.

Remember that we are rural and widespread. SEFD is better equipped than ever in our history to serve our communities. Still we only have four firefighters on duty at a time, and we have no central water source. Unlike a city, we are not able to hook up to a hydrant and start spraying. That makes our reality different in terms of what we can expect. Each of us needs to do what we can to make our properties as fire resistant as possible, have a plan in place, and practice it.

Much of this information was given at the Fire Safety Workshop held February 24 at the fire station, but we know not everyone was able to attend. Handouts on Community Connect and home fireproofing tips are available at the fire station.