



WILDFIRE WISDOM

Some smart ways to create a strong defense around your property

By Will Holford

Bastrop County residents know first-hand the devastation of wildfires. Since 2009, three wildfires have burned portions of the county. One of them, the 2011 Bastrop Complex Fire, was the largest wildfire in Texas history, burning more than 34,000 acres and destroying more than 1,600 homes and buildings.

But fire can be tamed. There are smart ways to protect people, homes and property as well as reduce harm to the ecosystem. Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative is introducing a new



WISING UP TO WILDFIRES

program called "FireSmart: Wising Up To Wildfires" to help local residents and businesses reduce their risk of fire damage.

In all three recent Bastrop County fires, flames damaged or destroyed some buildings but swept around others, causing little or no damage. The key to outmaneuver a fire, experts say, is to create and maintain so-called defensible space around homes and buildings, and to use fire-resistant materials in construction.

Bluebonnet is headquartered on Texas 21 East, in the heart of the Lost Pines region. The headquarters narrowly escaped damage or destruction during the 2011 fire. Since then, the co-op has taken steps to reduce fire risks.

The new program will provide fire-risk reduction information and fire-smart practices, which can protect lives, homes and property throughout Bluebonnet's service area.

"We learned some very valuable lessons from the last three wildfires, particularly the Bastrop Complex fire in 2011," said Matt Bentke, Bluebonnet's general manager. "Safety

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OPEN HOUSE HIGHLIGHTS FIRE DEFENSE

Bluebonnet is hosting a 'FireSmart: Wising Up To Wildfires' field day Sept. 17 at Bluebonnet's headquarters, 155 Electric Ave. (formerly 650 Texas 21 East), Bastrop. The field day is free and open to the community with events and activities from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Michal Hubbard, Bluebonnet's FireSmart coordinator for community education, and other Bluebonnet employees will be on hand to answer questions. Visitors to the event can see where and what vegetation Bluebonnet trimmed or removed to create defensible space and mitigate fire risk. Visitors can watch videos and pick up handouts with steps they can take at their homes and businesses.

Nonprofit environmental organizations from across the region, including the Texas Forest Service, will be on hand with information and displays. For information about 'FireSmart: Wising Up To Wildfires' and the field day, call 512-332-7977 or visit bluebonnet.coop/community/firesmart.

"Your property does not have to be bare of vegetation to be fire smart."

Source: Texas A&M Forest Service

"Think about where leaves or trash accumulate when the wind blows. These are the areas where embers will collect and start a fire."

Source: Texas A&M Forest Service

Joe Stafford illustrations

OUTSMART FIRES WITH LANDSCAPING AND MAINTENANCE

- Create a fuel-free area within 5 feet of your home, porch and deck by removing dry vegetation and mulch. Landscape with rocks or low-growing perennials that retain moisture. Keep rain gutters and roof clean.
- Prune trees so lowest branches are 6-10 feet above the ground, and do not allow branches to hang over or near your roof. Alternate tall and short trees and keep space between them.
- Within 30 feet of your home, do not store flammable materials such as woodpiles, boats, gas cans or infrequently used vehicles.
- Screen vents or openings in the attic or near the foundation to prevent embers from entering.
- Keep lawn watered. If it is brown, cut it down to reduce fire intensity. Always dispose of lawn clippings.

Sources: National Fire Protection Association, Texas A&M Forest Service

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MONTHLY MEETING

Bluebonnet's Board of Directors will meet at 9 a.m. Aug. 16, at Bluebonnet's Headquarters, 155 Electric Ave. (formerly 650 Texas Hwy. 21 East), Bastrop. Find the agenda and last-minute updates Aug. 12 at bluebonnet.coop. Hover your cursor over 'next board meeting' on our home page.

OFFICE CLOSINGS

Bluebonnet's offices will be closed Monday, Sept. 5, in observance of Labor Day.

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OUTAGES

Call **800-949-4414** if you have a power outage. Keep up with outages 24/7 at bluebonnet.coop. Hover your cursor over 'outage report' on our home page. You can also send us a text message: To get started, text **BBOUTAGE** to **85700** and follow the prompts. Save that number in your contacts, perhaps as "Bluebonnet Outages." If your power goes out, text **OUT** to that number. Download our free mobile app for iPhone or Android and you can report an outage on your smartphone.

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative produced the blue-bordered pages 18-25 in this issue of the magazine with content that is of specific interest or relevance to Bluebonnet members. The rest of the magazine's content is distributed statewide to any member of an electric cooperative in Texas. For information about the magazine, contact Janet Wilson at **512-750-5483** or email magazine@bluebonnet.coop.

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and Community are two of Bluebonnet's Foundation Values, so it is natural for us to share what we have learned with our members and residents in the communities we serve. During wildfires, more than with any other natural disaster, the way property owners maintain their land has a direct impact on everyone. That's why it's critically important to be fire smart."

Bluebonnet's program collects information, tips and best practices from expert sources and partners, including the Texas A&M Forest Service, the National Fire Protection Association and Firewise



Michal Hubbard
Bluebonnet's 'FireSmart: Wising Up To Wildfires' coordinator for community education

Communities, an NFPA program. Bluebonnet will host community meetings, workshops and presentations to explain ways to reduce fire danger at homes and offices. Every property owner can follow the recommended steps:

perform a wildfire risk evaluation; create a fire mitigation plan divided into multiple zones with different types of vegetation; incorporate fire-resistant materials in structures; create nonflammable barriers around buildings and remove flammable items, like patio furniture cushions, when not in use.

Wildfires aren't isolated to Bastrop County and the Lost Pines. Central Texas has diverse ecosystems like blackland prairie, post oak savannah and farm and



Thomas Silva, a Bluebonnet facilities technician, clears underbrush along the driveway at the co-op's headquarters in Bastrop. Underbrush in the 'ignition zone,' which extends up to 200 feet from a home or business, is close enough to ignite a structure from flame or heat.

ranch land.

"Every ecosystem is at risk for wildfire," said Michal Hubbard, Bluebonnet's "FireSmart: Wising Up to Wildfires" coordinator for community education. "And as more subdivisions are developed and homes built in rural areas, it's important to create what we call 'fire-adapted communities' to mitigate as much of that risk as possible.

"The first 30 feet around the home are most important, but the home ignition zone — the area where fire is close enough to ignite a

structure from flame or heat — extends out to 200 feet," Hubbard said.

The co-op will host a "FireSmart: Wising up to Wildfires" field day at its headquarters at 155 Electric Ave. (formerly 650 Texas 21 East), Saturday, Sept. 17. The public is invited to the free events from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Bluebonnet's wildfire risk evaluation and mitigation plan was developed in conjunction with Rich Gray, assistant chief and regional fire coordinator for the Texas A&M Forest Service. Gray, a Bastrop County resident, is an expert in

wildfires and has led firefighters during all three recent Bastrop County fires.

Gray has firsthand knowledge of the importance of defensible space around structures. In October 2015, he and a group of firefighters were evacuating residents and battling the Hidden Pines fire near the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center's Science Park adjacent to Buescher State Park near Smithville. A sudden shift in wind direction created a potentially dangerous situation that could have forced firefighters to evacuate the area.



Rich Gray
Assistant chief and regional fire coordinator for the Texas A&M Forest Service

But several homeowners had created defensible space with well-maintained ground cover, green grass and few pine needles.

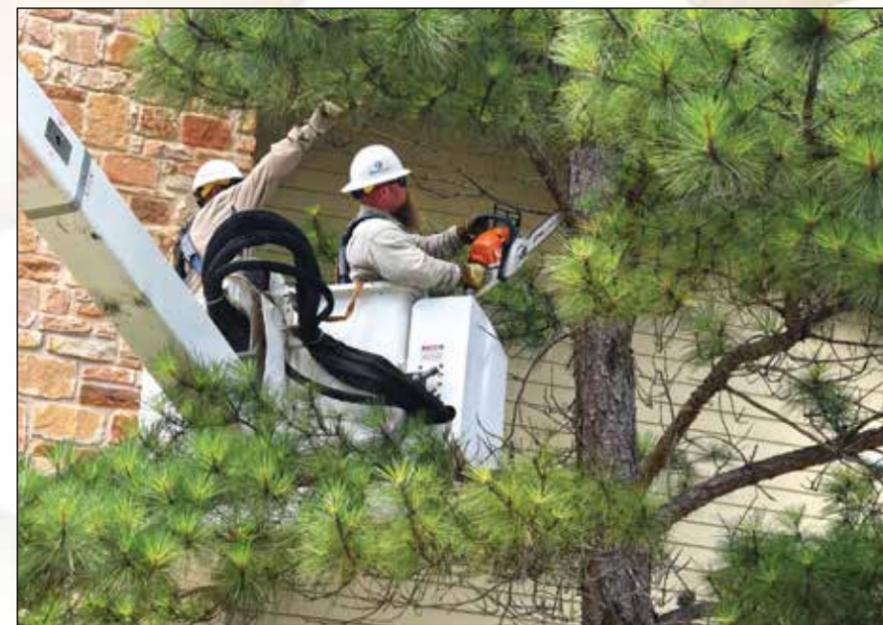
The firefighters felt comfortable enough to stay. They pushed the fire around the houses, saving them from destruction.

"If there had not been defensible spaces for us to operate from," Gray said, "we would have had to leave much earlier."

Flames can reach two to three times the height of any grass, shrubs or trees on fire.

That means a 3- to 6-foot shrub near a home can generate flames 6 to 18 feet high. The flames and radiant heat likely would set any nearby structure ablaze. But a well-maintained yard can keep flames low to the ground and slow enough to give firefighters time to contain a fire before it ignites homes and buildings.

Wildfires may continue to threaten our area, but smart defensive planning can help build a barrier between your home and flames. ■



Sarah Beal photos

Mike Siegeler, left, a Bluebonnet facilities technician, and **lineman Kenneth Roush**, trim limbs that touch the co-op's headquarters. Limbs that come in contact with a building increase the chance that a fire will spread to the structure.

"Consider the entire 'home ignition zone,' which extends up to 200 feet from the home."

Source:
Texas A&M Forest Service

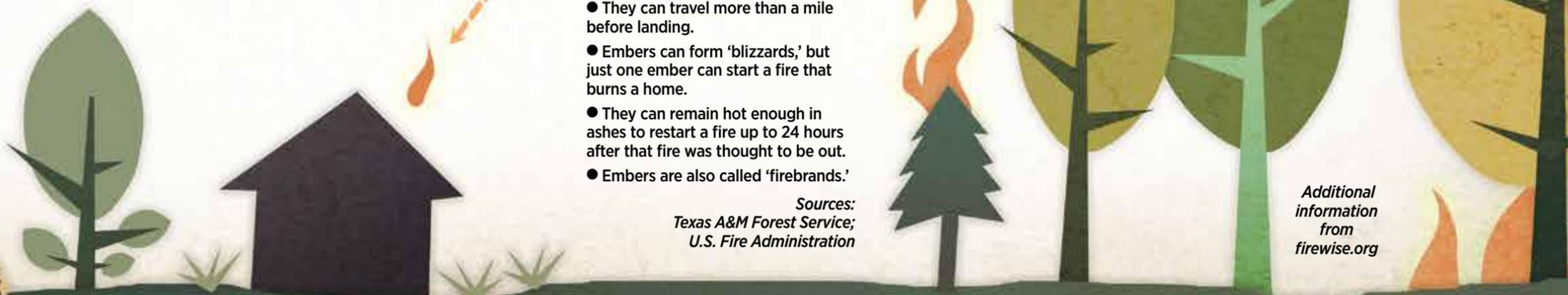
FIND OUT MORE

Want more information? These websites can help.

- Fire Adapted Communities, fireadapted.org
- Insurance Institute for Business & Home Safety, disastersafety.org
- National Fire Protection Association, firewise.org
- Texas A&M Forest Service, txforestservicetamu.edu and texaswildfirerisk.com
- U.S. Department of Homeland Security, ready.gov

"Wildfire embers can travel over one mile. Control what happens when they land."

Source: *Fire Adapted Communities*



DANGER OF EMBERS

- Embers are small pieces of burning or glowing coal or wood.
- They can travel more than a mile before landing.
- Embers can form 'blizzards,' but just one ember can start a fire that burns a home.
- They can remain hot enough in ashes to restart a fire up to 24 hours after that fire was thought to be out.
- Embers are also called 'firebrands.'

Sources:
Texas A&M Forest Service;
U.S. Fire Administration

Additional information from firewise.org

- Provide easy access for emergency vehicles
- Store firewood and other flammable materials away from your home
- Prune low-hanging branches, mow the lawn regularly and landscape with fire-resistant plants

ZONE ONE: The area within 30 feet of the home. It should be kept lean, clean and green. Less vegetation is better — properly watered — with no accumulation of flammable debris.

ZONE TWO: The area up to 100 feet from the home. This is an area of fuel reduction to limit the intensity of any fire. Trees and shrubs should be thinned to provide at least 10 feet of space between crowns.

ZONE THREE: Area extending to the property line and up to 200 feet beyond the structure. Trees and large shrubs should be regularly pruned to prevent a ground fire from climbing into the crowns of trees. Dead and downed debris should be removed.