



# Northern Rockies Ledger

*Considerations for the 2007 Fire Season  
from the Northern Rockies Coordinating Group*

## **It Only Takes a Spark**

#4 - August 19, 2007. Large, dangerous wildfires continue to worry the west. There are ways to put the worry into action before a wildfire reaches a home.

Many wildland urban interface residents use the Firewise concepts of defensible space around their homes ([www.firewise.org](http://www.firewise.org)). While wildland firefighters don't fight structure fires, they work within each threat situation to suppress the fire or steer it away from buildings.

Wildfires are a risk in two main ways when they approach structures. Ground fires dry the leaves and needles in the trees above through convective heat. As the heat rises, the treetops or crowns burst into flames and embers fly out in front of the fire. As this crown fire approaches, these embers can blow into a structure through vents or chimneys, ignite a flammable roof, and set fire to dead leaves and needles left in a gutter or in the yard.

The fire itself also emits radiant heat similar to the heat felt in front of a fireplace. In most cases, radiant heat will not ignite another object, like the sides of a house, when it is further than thirty to fifty feet away.

Keeping embers out of the house and vegetation away from the walls, individual homeowners can help protect their property from wildfire damage.

There is also a growing strength of community as homeowners work together on defensible space projects. As the wildland urban interface grows, more and more neighbors are joining with federal, state and local natural resource agencies

to build Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPP). The CWPPs in the Northern Rockies focus on assessing wildfire risk and planning and implementing fuel reduction projects to reduce the risk over time.

CWPP fuel treatments on public and private lands were significant in firefighter success in containing the recent Tin Cup Fire outside Darby Montana. With a collaborative partnership including the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC), U.S. Forest Service, Bitter Root Conservation and Development Area, Inc. (RC&D), and private landowners, 214 acres of the Bitterroot National Forest and 102 acres of private land were treated.

Top fire managers reported that the treatments eliminated the ladder fuels that fires burn to climb up to treetops. This resulted in less torching and crowning in the treetops which in turn limited fire spread and ember spotting and allowed firefighters to be more effective. Reportedly, firefighters could defend all the homes in the Stage I and Stage II evacuation areas and saved 100 homes.

Homeowners are empowered to protect private property from wildfire as individuals and as unique communities through the CWPP program. While there are no guarantees, fuel reduction and defensible space practices can certainly reduce the risk of disaster.

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