

Officials stress wildfire danger in Aspen area, the valley

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[JANET URQUHART](#)

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ASPEN – Describing the worst wildfire danger they've seen in a decade, fire officials on Tuesday defended an ongoing burn ban in Pitkin County and urged homeowners to both create defensible space around their residences and be prepared to evacuate.

The county, meanwhile, is preparing to test its 911 emergency notification system, sending out reverse test calls to some 3,000 land-based phone lines.

“We have a decadent, diseased, infested forest, and it's all around us,” Basalt Fire Chief Scott Thompson told Aspen City Council members and county commissioners during a joint session Tuesday afternoon.

And, he said, fuel moisture levels in the vegetation surrounding the Roaring Fork Valley are lower than they were in 2001-02, when drought conditions helped facilitate the spread of the 2002 Coal Seam Fire in Glenwood Springs.

This year's spring winds and the early disappearance of snow and frost have dried out the vegetation quickly, according to Thompson.

“We're at a very dangerous level of fuel moisture,” he said.

City staffers are preparing to bring a proposal before the council to fund a consultant who will advise residents on how to prepare defensible spaces around their homes. Those who follow the recommendations can have any trimmed vegetation chipped and hauled away for free if the council agrees with the plan. A similar measure was offered a decade ago during a season of high wildfire danger, said Barry Crook, assistant city manager.

Commissioner Rachel Richards suggested that the county explore making a similar offer to its residents.

“The homeowners have to help us help them,” said Ed Van Walraven, Aspen fire marshal, urging residents to create a 30-foot defensible space around homes in which vegetation is thinned and an irrigated “greenbelt” exists. “Fire-wise” landscaping choices also can help, he said.

John Mele, fire chief for the Snowmass-Wildcat Fire Protection District, urged residents to have an evacuation plan in place before they're notified that it's time to go. He also suggested that residents prepare “go kits” with three days' worth of basic necessities – the sorts of items one would want during a stay at a Red Cross evacuation center, for example. They may contain such items as a flashlight,

toothbrush and clothing, he said.

Within the next month, the county intends to arrange a test of its system to notify residents of an emergency via land-based phone lines, according to Mark Gamrat, communications director. There are about 18,500 lines in the county; about 3,000 will be tested, including some in areas outside county borders that are part of the system.

The testing will touch areas of Aspen's West End, the Crystal Valley and Marble, the Fryingpan Valley, Missouri Heights, El Jebel, Snowmass Village and Woody Creek up to Lenado, he said.

County residents who depend on cell phones can sign up for text alerts at www.pitkinalert.org. That system also sends out pages and email alerts.

While officials stressed the need to prepare for wildfire, a burn ban enacted in Pitkin County early last month remains in place. It should not be rescinded, the fire chiefs said.

“We haven't had a large fire in the Roaring Fork Valley or Crystal Valley, and we intend to keep it that way,” said Carbondale Fire Chief Ron Leach.

A house fire and adjacent brush fire in the Swiss Village subdivision in the Crystal Valley south of Carbondale last month drew a swift and strong response from firefighters and left residents there shaken, Leach said.

“Some people are actually scared of the fire danger,” he said.

Despite the county's burn ban, fire officials are working closely with ranchers to permit some pre-approved agricultural burning when conditions permit. The Aspen Fire Protection District doesn't permit any open burning at all as a matter of course after May 31, according to VanWalraven.

The ban does permit use of gas grills and permanent charcoal grills, but makeshift fire pits are prohibited. The city of Aspen is already contemplating Fourth of July fireworks at the city golf course rather than on Aspen Mountain, Mayor Mick Ireland noted.

Fireworks aren't permitted under the ban.

The county's ban does not apply to federal lands. Go to www.pitkinemergency.org for more on the county's burn ban and other wildfire information.

janet@aspentimes.com