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Officials urge wildfire vigilance

While Florida residents enjoy the beauty and peace of Florida's landscape, scenery and warm climate, these same characteristics also cause severe wildfires. Each year, thousands of acres of land and many homes are destroyed by fires. Droughts, lightning, burning debris or carelessness contribute to the ignition of wildfires. Additionally, a growing number of people live in new Florida communities, building homes in areas that were once wild lands. It is everyone's responsibility to keep a watchful eye on the threat of wildfires.

Sarasota County Fire Chief Brian Gorski warns that "lack of concern and lack of fire safety measures can be disastrous. As wildfires often begin unnoticed and spread quickly, residents can reduce risk to family, home and property by creating a family plan. Decide what to do and where to go before wildfires threaten."

- Most Florida wildfires are caused by lightning strikes. Arson and carelessly discarded cigarette butts are also a big problem. Remember there is an ordinance against throwing cigarette butts and ashes out of vehicles. You could be responsible for damages your carelessness may cause.
- Define your defensible space, a minimum of 30-foot non-combustible area around your house that reduces the intensity and risk of a wildfire from starting or spreading to your home. Defensible space not only helps protect your home in the critical minutes it takes a fire to pass, it also gives firefighters an area to work in. During a large scale fire, when many homes are at risk, firefighters must focus on homes they can safely defend.
- Clearing flammable vegetation and debris by 30 feet and installing heat resistant soffit vents will enhance your home's chances to survive wildfire.
- Monitor your local radio and television stations for fire reports, evacuation procedures and evacuation centers. Keep an emergency checklist handy and prepare to evacuate if your neighborhood is threatened. Proper preparation includes closing all windows and doors, arranging garden hoses so they can reach any area of your house, and packing your car for quick departure.
- Store firewood, propane tanks or gasoline as far from the house as possible.
- Clean gutters and roof of leaf litter and pine needles.
- When planting foundation plants, keep a clear space at plant maturity of at least 2-3 feet from the side of the house. Use fire-resistant plants as much as possible, including saw palmetto, gallberry, wax myrtle and cedar.
- Do not dispose of yard waste trimmings or dead plants on vacant lots.
- Make sure smoke alarms are in good working order in your home.
- Have an emergency supply kit ready. Every family should have an emergency supply kit for any disaster event.
- Visit www.firewise.org to obtain more information about wildfires.

For more information about wildfires, contact the Sarasota County Call Center at 941-861-5000.