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TUCSON REGION STAR SPECIAL REPORT

Experts, residents try to find shared ground on 'good' fire

By Tom Beal

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Mount Lemmon is the forested tip of a volcanically lifted pyramid whose north and east facets have burned in three calamitous fires during this decade.

On the third facet, Pusch Ridge on the southwest, vegetation-choked canyons all point upwind toward \$1 billion worth of homes, businesses, observatories and communication towers atop the Santa Catalina Mountains.

The burned areas need to burn again, scientists say, and Pusch Ridge needs fire to clear vegetation that grew during a century of fire suppression and could provide fuel for another big fire on the mountain.



The Catalina-Rincon FireScape team thinks it can sell those concepts to mountain residents who will have to put up with the smoke and the fear that will come with the restorative fires.

In theory, it's an easy choice. Frequent, low-intensity fires are easy to manage and direct. They make the forest healthier and safer by burning leaves and pine needles, downed trees, thick vegetation and small trees — the "ladder fuels" that carry fire into the crowns of the big trees that would otherwise survive ground fires.

fires.

In Summerhaven and Oracle, where homes border thick forest, residents recognize the need to clear fuels, but they would like more reliance on "mechanical thinning" — cutting and removal.

"It's going to be a hard sell," said Steve Plevel, former district ranger for the U.S. Forest Service in the Catalinas and a member of the team putting together the Catalina-Rincon FireScape plan. "After what these people have been through, any fire is scary," Plevel said.

The plan will involve a mix of "treatments" that include mechanical thinning and burning, and it will try to minimize effects such as smoke, Plevel said.

Summerhaven residents welcome the renewed attention being paid to them, said longtime resident Michael Stanley, but they seek assurance that any landscape-scale burning is preceded by forest treatments that ensure the safety of the rapidly rebuilding enclave where 340 homes and businesses burned in the Aspen Fire six years ago.

The fire, which denuded large swaths of the forested hills, made it even more evident to Stanley that he lives in a small and vulnerable setting.

"It took the vastness out of the forest and made it tiny," he said.

The fires graphically revealed the unique nature of Sky Island forests, with their forest-capped peaks sitting atop a succession of vegetation zones of increasing size and burnability.

"We live on a mountain, not in the mountains," Stanley said.

Summerhaven sure doesn't look like it could burn again.

Large swaths of the slopes rising east and west of Sabino Creek are denuded. The 162 building permits issued for homes and businesses since the fire require fire-safe construction and materials. Standing-seam metal roofs, covered eaves and concrete-board siding abound.

There are, however, unburned patches of forest. Even in the burn, sun-loving species sprout up, and partially burned trees fall down. Left alone, the mountain will burn again, eventually.

"I'm really concerned about the forest we have left. If we don't start treating it, we're going to lose it," said DeAnna Barnella, assistant chief of the Mount Lemmon Fire

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"Any fire is scary" to residents of a rebuilding Summerhaven, Forest Service officials acknowledge, but they say controlled fire is needed to keep these newly rebuilt homes safe. Six years ago, the Aspen Fire all but leveled the village, destroying 340 homes and businesses.

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"People have to manually thin, or Mother Nature is surely going to do it, and she won't be very nice about it."

Oracle resident Bob Skiba, discussing one step toward keeping wildfires in check

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District.

The Fire District now rates the potential burn severity of parcels slated for building, and it coordinates a program called Firewise that teaches residents how to create "defensible space" around their homes.

But many of Summerhaven's homes still lie within unburned curtains of tall trees, Barnella said. She'd like to see more thinning projects done on the perimeter of the village.

Stanley said he thinks the small number of residents (about 60) and larger number of cabin owners atop the mountain can deal with the risk and inconvenience of setting fires or allowing them to burn, as long as they occur when plenty of resources are available to snuff them if they escape.

Fire lore has plenty of examples of that. Most notable in this decade was a prescribed burn near Los Alamos, N.M., that jumped its lines and destroyed about 200 homes.

Just in October, a prescribed fire in Arizona's Kaibab National Forest, southwest of Williams, sparked across barriers when the wind shifted, prompting the evacuation of 60 homes and the closure of schools in the Northern Arizona town.

Fire managers were able to contain it after snagging six air tankers that had been deployed to California wildfires.

"It is difficult to burn close to private property," Kaibab fire spokeswoman Punky Moore said.

The Forest Service apologized to residents, and Moore said something obviously was wrong with both the weather forecast and the prescription of the blaze itself. October is usually a safe month for such burns, but last summer was abnormally dry, she said.

Stanley and Barnella both said their biggest concerns are that this plan will not materialize or that money will not be allocated for forest-thinning and firebreaks to prepare for the burns.

Stanley, manager of the Mount Lemmon Water District, said he remembers prescribed burns held up by a single resident with sensitivity to smoke or by a single spotted owl.

Summerhaven would need a "bulletproof barrier" of firebreaks and thinned forest before she would consider allowing a fire to burn on Pusch Ridge, said Kristy Lund, a National Park Service fire manager who has dual authority for Saguaro National Park and for U.S. Forest Service land in the Catalinas.

You hear the same fears in Oracle, in the lower reaches of the Catalinas' north side.

There, a thick forest of mostly oak and manzanita has choked the canyons and overrun the hills on both private land and the Coronado National Forest.

Oracle residents are keenly aware of the risks, having watched fire nearly burn into town from the mountains on numerous occasions in the past two decades.

When he first arrived in Oracle nine years ago, Oracle Fire Battalion Chief Larry Southard would drive through the forested hills marveling at the beauty of the place. Now when he patrols the 43 square miles of his district, he sees only danger.

Southard has been spreading the alarm, heading up a Firewise program that so far has enlisted the owners of half of the community's 1,800 homes in efforts to create defensible spaces around their dwellings.

That percentage makes it tough for Bob Skiba and his wife to feel safe on their 12 acres, despite a long and continuing assault on the vegetation surrounding the house, guesthouse, workshop and barn.

Skiba has put metal roofs on everything but the chicken coop. He has bulldozed firebreaks and thinned the oak, manzanita and catclaw. He routinely burns slash piles in his former equestrian arena — with a permit and a water hose handy on a windless day.

All of those actions won't protect him from two absentee neighbors whose property is choked with trees, living and dead.

"People have to manually thin," Skiba said, "or Mother Nature is surely going to do it, and she won't be very nice about it."

In addition to being the community Firewise scold, Southard has worked with colleagues in the Coronado National Forest on thinning the forest and creating perimeters of denuded ground — fuel breaks. There is an 18-mile-long fuel break around the town, but in places it's simply an enlarged trail or a narrow strip of road.

Southard said the Forest Service is a good neighbor, but Oracle residents would like to see more done in the thick oak forest south of the town.

"A lot of our citizens say, 'Shouldn't they do something on their side of the fence?' " Southard said.

The Forest Service recently completed an environmental assessment for nearly 15,000 acres south of Oracle that it wants to thin and burn. About 75 percent of that area burned in the Aspen or Oracle Hill fires of 2003 and 2002.

Plans call for thinning and crushing vegetation, widening some firebreaks and creating new ones before fires are set.

"In the absence of the natural fire cycle (i.e., frequent low-intensity fires), the burned areas will ultimately become choked with shrubs and small trees that increase the fuel loading," the report reads.

That's the dilemma for those living at what forest managers call the wildland-urban interface: If you're not prepared to tolerate the smoke and the danger of many small fires, you risk the big one that burns down your home along with the forest surrounding it.

Contact reporter Tom Beal at 573-4158 or tbeal@azstarnet.com

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