

Oklahoma is known for a lot of things: football, tornados, and country music singers are just a few of those that come to mind. In the last couple of years, however, wildfires are starting to make their way up the list. The fire seasons of 2005 and 2006 affected almost every community in Oklahoma as firefighters battled blazes all across the state. Certainly, none of us will forget the calamity of the April 9, 2009 fires, especially those in and around the Oklahoma City area. And just when it seemed that maybe everything would be normal again, a large number of resort cabins located just north of Broken Bow were threatened by wildfire last Saturday. To understand why this is significant, you must first realize the kind of resort development that has been occurring in that corner of the state. Over the past few years, more than 800 rental cabins have been built in the woods near Broken Bow Lake. In fact, it has turned into a booming business even through the Great Recession. These aren't anything like your granddad's hunting cabin either; these are \$500,000 log palaces sought out by weekenders and vacationers from north Texas. So why is all of this important? State Forester John Burwell explains, "The development occurring around Broken Bow is similar to what we are seeing in many areas throughout the state. As people start to appreciate the natural beauty of Oklahoma they understandably want to move to it. However, many of these new inhabitants are not well versed in how to safely maintain their homes in these types of environments." Burwell went on to explain that inhabitants of the Wildland Urban Interface or, WUI for short, face special wildfire risks. In fact, it turns out that you don't have to live in the mountains to be part of the WUI. Many of the subdivisions and small communities surrounding our urban centers are considered WUI areas. Simply enough, a WUI can be found anywhere the more manicured, controlled environment of the cities meets the countryside. In these areas, fires that start in the grass, brush or trees can quickly move into the fringes of the developed areas and burn down homes. In worst case scenarios like Midwest City in 2009, entire subdivisions can be impacted once a wildfire breaks into the community. That's why last Saturday is so important, it is a sure sign that the new normal in Oklahoma is one where we have to be more vigilant and proactive in preparing our homes against wildfires. According to Burwell, "Oklahoma Forestry Services has embraced the Firewise program that helps to educate homeowners in the WUI about proactive steps they can take to protect their homes. In fact, we are actively encouraging communities to participate in the Oklahoma Firewise program by offering grants and free community assistance." Interestingly enough, the Firewise program was developed in response to the increased wildfire hazards faced by residents of the WUI all across the U.S. Changes in land use have resulted in presence of increased levels of wildfire fuels such as tall grasses, brush and cedars. As these "fuels" have built up around our homes, the risk associated with any outdoor fire has increased. The Firewise program gives homeowners practical advice about how to maintain a beautiful, yet safe home environment by trimming up the lower limbs of trees, moving flammable materials, such as firewood, gasoline, leaves, etc, away from the home, choosing fire resistant building materials and ensuring adequate evacuation routes. In essence, the Firewise program advises that you choose building materials that are fire resistant and maintain an area around the home called a defensible space. Defensible space is an area with few flammable materials that serves as a buffer between your home and the wildfire raging in the brush. This buffer may protect your home itself, give the fire department the time it needs to arrive at the scene and/or give them a decent chance to save your home once they arrive. If you would like to learn more about the Oklahoma Firewise program and how to protect your home, please visit their website at: <http://www.forestry.ok.gov/fire-prep-for-homeowners>. If you like what you learn, then you

might also try to start a Firewise Board in your community and seek a grant to conduct a Community Wildfire Protection Plan.