



Okanogan

Conservation
District

Wildfire Resilience

How Fast Can Your House Run?

By Kirsten Cook, Former Okanogan CD Community Outreach Director

“How fast can your house run?”. A local wildland firefighter told me about this motto he learned from folks in the Alaska Division of Forestry. But even if your house can’t run, what it can do is FIGHT.

Research shows that most homes are destroyed by embers, in some cases from fires as far as a mile or two away. Direct flame contact and radiant heat can also lead to home ignitions. A home that fights fire minimizes risks from embers, direct flames, and radiant heat by focusing on four things: **design, materials, landscaping, and maintenance.**

DESIGN: Build with slope and wind in mind: the steeper the slope, the more intense the fire behavior will be, especially when driven by wind. If you can’t avoid building on a hillside, set the home back at least 30’ from the edge of the slope. Keep the structure simple: complicated roof lines and lots of corners add places for embers to pile up. Avoid building decks or other attachments that overhang slopes because fire moves quickly uphill.

MATERIALS: A home that fights fire is built with materials that don’t catch fire! Choose metal roofs, non-flammable siding, and ember resistant vents. Headwaters Economics (an independent, non-partisan research organization) published a report in 2018 confirming that **ignition-resistant construction costs the same or less** than traditional construction when building a new home. A wildfire-resistant home may be the key to keeping home insurance affordable or keeping it at all.



This home exemplifies fire resistant construction with its metal roof, metal and fiber cement siding, concrete perimeter, and metal posts.

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LANDSCAPING: Complement your fire-resistant home, don't work against it. Keep a five-foot buffer around your foundation that is free of plants and other flammable materials, especially wood chip mulch. Concrete slab, pavers, gravel, and stone are all good choices for a fire-free perimeter. Beyond the 5-foot zone, keep plants well-spaced (so if one ignites, fire cannot spread to others) and choose species that are fire-resistant. Large trees close to the home can increase risk, so think carefully about where and how many trees you keep on the building site, especially if those trees are going to shed needles and cones on your home and yard constantly.



This wood-sided home is at very high risk from embers, direct flame contact, and radiant heat ignition pathways. Firefighters call plants like this juniper “gasoline plants” due to their flammability.

MAINTENANCE: Fire-resistant construction and landscaping tends to reduce maintenance needs. If your home and landscape are easier to maintain, it will take you less time and energy to keep the ignition potential low during fire season.

There are many resources to help you build a home that fights fire, and many resources to help increase the resiliency of existing homes. Okanogan CD offers free on-site fire resiliency and home risk assessments for new home construction and existing homes. Every home has unique features that impact its risk for wildfire damage. Fire resiliency and home risk assessments can help identify how those features impact resiliency and risk, and how you can work to increase your home's resiliency and reduce overall risk during a wildfire.

Sign up and learn more at <https://www.okanogancd.org/wildfire>