Protecting Yourself From Wildfire!
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The local drought, high winds and warm, low humidity days have been a recipe for disaster to many of our friends and neighbors. It doesn’t take much of a spark to start a fire that can run for miles. The drought already has us short of forage and any loss of pasture and hay can become a severe burden. In the following paragraphs, we will try to explore a few options to help us try and protect our precious resources, and some suggestions on where to go for help if we do lose our forage to wildfire.

If you have farm and ranch insurance policies, you may want to review the coverage to make sure that you are in compliance with the policy restrictions. Some policies state the number of hay bales allowed per stack and the distance required between stacks. By knowing what your policy covers and any restrictions placed on that coverage, you may be able to save yourself some grief if a wildfire does cross your property.

You may want to consider protecting the stored hay you have now. One way to do that is to move it to storage that takes it out of harms way. Moving it to the center of a wheat field or storing it on a gravel or dirt pad will go a long way in protecting it from grass fires. You could also disk strips around the stored hay. In fire school we were taught to make a fire break 1.5 times the height of the tallest close fuel. A 10 to 20 foot wide disk strip all the way around the hay stack should protect it from all but the most wind blown wildfires. The disk strip needs to be mineral soil in order to stop a fire. Any grass left on top after diskng can carry a fire across the strip. Be aware that fire breaks need to be covered but tall grass can be blown for quite some distance during extremely high winds and can ignite even those hay stacks protected by disk strips. Disk strips will however give you a fighting chance at saving your hay stacks, should fire break out. One caution, if it does ever start raining, it may be difficult to get through the mud that results from bare soil, to retrieve the hay for feeding.

If you have a cattle sprayer or pesticide sprayer with a hand wand, rinse them out thoroughly and fill with water. Leave them attached to the tractor ready for use in case of emergency. If you become aware of a wildfire headed your way, you can use this equipment to wet down your hay pile to reduce the risk of fire brands landing on the haystack and burning up your stored hay. Unless you are a trained firefighter, you should not try to fight the oncoming fire yourself; your life is worth more than any stack of hay. Once you have wet down the haystack, get yourself and your equipment to a safe area.

Disk strips can also help protect pastures that border highways and county roads. There are many ways a wildfire can get started, but discarded cigarettes from passing vehicles, are one of the prime causes. If you can protect your pastures along roadways, you may be able to reduce the chances of wildfire burning off your whole place. Again, these strips cannot protect you from fire brands blown long distances on high winds, but they may save your pasture from small fires that start along a roadway. Any strips that are disked down a slope should be planted with ryegrass, wheat, or rye in the fall to reduce the amount of erosion on that slope once spring rains do come.

Protecting houses and out-buildings with disk strips is another effective way of reducing risk. Get far enough away from the building so that firefighters have enough room to move equipment around inside the strip. This will give them the opportunity to fight any spot fires that may be blown inside the safety zone without fear of getting stuck.

Watering your lawn on a weekly basis will go a long way in slowing down a wildfire in short grass; the green grass and wet organic matter at the soil surface will help rob energy from the fire and slow down its forward progress. Remove leaves, high grass and brush from around the foundations of the buildings. The less fuel there is close to the building, the better chance fire fighters will have of saving the structure.

Contact your local county extension educator for more information about protecting yourself from wildfires. Hopefully, in the not to distant future, the weather will change to a wetter pattern, relieving the probability of wildfire in your local area.