

## Experts Point Out Wildland Fire Issues

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The Westbank is a wildfire prone area that continues to concern local fire fighters, despite recent rains. The qualities that make the area highly prized by homeowners - rolling hills, undeveloped wooded landscapes, nice breezes and plenty of sunshine-filled days - are the same qualities that increase the risk of wildfire.

Just as concerning to firefighters as the risk of a fire starting is what could happen once one does. Mike Elliott, assistant chief of the Westlake Fire Department, said inadequate fire breaks, hilly terrain, winds and logistical evacuation problems could cause a fire to escalate out of control quickly once it starts.

“Most people think a fire department is going to be able to stop a big fire,” he said. “We can’t. Once it creates its own climate, it becomes almost impossible to stop. When the right factors come together, it can happen.”

The largest fire in Westbank history was started on St. Stephen’s School Road in April 1961 by a cigarette tossed out of a car window. Strong winds spread the fire over 4,000 acres in three days. It took the aid of hundreds of St. Edward’s and University of Texas student volunteers and contractors with bulldozers cutting fire lines to bring the blaze under control.

Since 2000, the WFD has responded to more than 75 grass or brush fires in the Westbank, most involving damage to a half an acre or less. In 2006, a man was killed in a brush fire that ignited when his car veered off Loop 360 and crashed in a field to the side of the road.

“We love the topography out here that makes it high risk, and we don’t want to change that,” said Elliott. “But, we need to be aware that it is a natural fuel.”

He said the Westbank shares many factors with the Oakland and San Diego County areas of California famous for wildfire trouble - hills, tall grasses and cedar trees. Hills increase the power of fires by tunneling wind. Fires also burn faster uphill.

Elliott said other Westbank aspects that increase the risk and damage from fire include pre-existing drought conditions, difficult access to fire sites and winds from the north/northwest that usually accompany cold fronts and bring lower humidity levels.

There are some risk factors property owners can do something about. Elliott said people should be vigilant about removing existing brush piles from their land and trimming dead branches off of trees.

Cleaning leaves out of gutters on a regular basis can also lessen the chance of embers spreading fire onto a home. Homeowners should use fire resistant building materials and plants whenever possible.

Elliott also recommends clearing a defensible space of more than 30 feet through the vegetation around a home, removing underbrush, cutting down grass and removing trees and shrubs.

Hanna Ogle, personal lines manager at Watkins Insurance Group, recommends increasing that cleared space up to 75 feet when possible.

“You need to give firefighters a place to make a defensible stand to protect your home during a fire,” she said. “If it is wildfire season and there is a fire, you don’t want to give it a path to follow leading directly to your house.”

Ogle said people seldom think a fire is going to happen to them, but she knows all too well disasters can strike at any time. She said homeowners should do what they can to reduce their risk and prepare in advance for a possible house fire.

“The best thing you can do is keep important information stored electronically away from your home,” she said. “You are going to need things like the name of your homeowner insurance company, your policy number and important contact information. You can’t count on having anything you keep at the house.”

She recommends homeowners scan and e-mail to themselves any documents they want to have available, or keep second copies at the office. She also suggests homeowners establish the value of the contents of their house and that renters make sure they purchase rental insurance.

“Most people seriously undervalue their belongings when they purchase insurance coverage,” she said.

Elliott said the current risk of a fire in the Westbank is not as high as it was in September. He said rains during the last two months have helped, but, to significantly reduce fire risk, the area needs consistent rain every two weeks.

Elliott said light rain can actually cause vegetation to grow higher, but not provide enough moisture to prevent a fire or slow its progress. He wants local residents to take the danger of a wildfire to heart.

“If we get a big fire in this area, we are not going to be able to stop it,” he cautioned.

“People need to evacuate quickly when we tell them to.”

Mayor Mark Urdahl recently created a fire safety task force for the city of West Lake Hills that organizes the cleanup of dead wood each spring and fall.

He said that, while removing debris after an ice storm last winter, city officials realized that most of what they were cleaning up was dead wood. Urdahl decided the city should provide proactive services to residents, removing the hazardous dead wood on a regular basis.

Now, twice a year, West Lake Hills residents can drag their wood to the curb and the city will make it disappear.

“This type of ladder fuel is the most obvious danger we can quickly eliminate to mitigate wildfire danger,” Urdahl said. “It’s a simple first step everyone can work on. Then we can look at taking further steps.”

Urdahl said West Lake Hills would be investigating programs and funding available to help residents in high-risk fire areas reduce.