



Residents get Firewise for wildfires

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By Bill Harlan, Journal Staff Writer

Last week, Lead was named an official "Firewise Community," and cabin owners in Spearfish Canyon hope someday to follow suit.

Firewise Communities/USA is a project of the National Wildland/Urban Interface Fire Program, which is a consortium of federal and state agencies that manage public lands and fight wildfires. It includes the U.S. Forest Service, the Interior Department and state agencies.

The program gets communities and citizens involved in protecting themselves from wildfire, mainly by clearing trees and brush around homes to create "defensible space."

The Spearfish Canyon Owners Association on Monday held a Firewise Day, which is one step in a long process toward becoming "Firewise."

Cabin owners worked side by side all day Monday with about 30 firefighters and foresters from the Forest Service. Trucks hauled crews and loads of deadfall and other debris up and down the canyon, and the roar of chain saws and chippers echoed off the canyon walls.

"It has to be a cooperative effort," Northern Hills District Ranger Pam Brown said Monday.

Cabin owners in the past have been critical of the Forest Service, which owns most of the land in the canyon, for not thinning the forest quickly enough, but on Monday, canyon Firewise chairman Paul Hedge had nothing but praise for federal foresters. "We're cooperating, and they're cooperating," he said. "I hope it's making the canyon more safe."

Most participants agreed it was, except for the tree that one overly enthusiastic volunteer felled onto a pickup truck hauling a chipper. There were no injuries. Chipper and truck survived.

Cabin-owners association members already have a five-year plan in place to make their 22-mile-long community safer from wildfire. In fact, they're just completing the first year of the project, and they are 25 percent done, Hedge said.

They have also built a new \$250,000 fire hall near Savoy, and they've begun the process of assessing every cabin in the canyon for its vulnerability to wildfire.

The city of Lead, however, is a few years ahead of the canyon cabin owners — and, for that matter, the nation.

Assistant fire chief Jerome Harvey said Monday that Lead is the first entire municipality to earn the Firewise label. There are 46 Firewise communities in the nation, but most, such as the Mountain Plains subdivision in Spearfish, are neighborhoods.

"We have an entire community to protect," Harvey said.

Lead was also the first city in the nation to write a community fire plan. The city also has a Firewise coordinator, Charity Panner, two other full-time Firewise workers and two seasonal workers.

The seven-person crew works year-round thinning forests and brush. Panner and her colleagues also conduct free property assessments.

Lead has been spending more than \$150,000 a year on its Firewise projects. Most of the funding comes from federal grants, but part of it comes from the city itself, mostly in the form of employees and equipment.

Harvey said he and other Lead officials had been working on the project since 1999, and he doesn't expect that work to end. Ever.

"We want to get the point across that this is a way of life," Harvey said. People who live near the Black Hills National Forest will always live with fire. "We have to trim our trees just like we mow our lawns," he said. "That's just the way it's got to be."

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