

Planning key in protecting homes, parks from wildfires

By Linda Wuebben / World-Herald News Service | Posted: Thursday, July 3, 2014 1:00 am

CROFTON, Neb. — “If it can happen, it will.”

That’s the warning that Nebraska Forest Service fire specialist Seth Peterson gave during a recent fire awareness workshop.

Peterson fought the wildfires that burned relentlessly in north central and western Nebraska in 2012. His firefighting crew’s specialty was determining which homes could be saved.

He came to Crofton last week with Nebraska foresters Steve Rasmussen, Sandy Benson and Mike Morgan.

The fire workshop was developed by Rasmussen, who is the northeast district forester with the Nebraska Forest Service.

The Nebraska Legislature made funds available for fighting fires and educating rural homeowners.

The Forest Service has designated the area around Lewis and Clark Lake in northern Knox County as at high risk for a serious wildfire, because of the many conifers, cedar trees living and dead, compacted in the hills and valleys along the lake.

Rasmussen focused on what homeowners can do to help their homes be “firewise.” That includes creating a defendable space around a home for firefighters to work with if there is a fire.

David Kinneman, a parks superintendent with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, is currently working at Weigand-Burbach State Park north of Crofton. Kinneman was superintendent at Chadron State Park when wildfires threatened the western park’s existence.

“The first thing I noticed when I came to Weigand-Burbach were the cedar trees along the roadside,” Kinneman said. “I realized it is a serious problem.”

He said the same situation existed at Chadron State Park, and the forest service decided to create a forest fire management plan. It was a hard sell and took a few years for the project to get approval, he said.

The plan described the serious situation in the park: There hadn’t been a major fire since 1973, and the forest floor was thick with dead growth, pine needles and leaves.

Thinning of the volunteer trees was necessary and time-consuming. Some were removed with large machinery and some by hand.

The plan included a process for selling the trees for lumber, which would provide income for the project expenses.

The logging companies had to build roads to move through the wooded area and remove the trees. The roads were used for trails in the park after the thinning was completed.

“When it was all done, we broke even,” Kinneman said. “But I’m living proof, standing here today, telling you it worked.”

Not every home was saved from the wildfires, but the park is still thriving because of the work done over a period of several years, he said.

Benson talked about wildfires at Valentine that came within one-quarter mile of her house. She sees value in metal roofs, fire-resistant siding and planned landscaping.

She presented the process that Valentine completed to be designated a firewise community, the first Nebraska community to do so. Completion of a firewise plan enables a community to qualify for funds to assist with tree thinning and removal.

“We need firewise programs for not only landowners but also for communities,” Benson said. “When humans meet the woods, wildfires will happen.”