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By Dennis Webb

Residential areas in the danger zone

Fire vulnerability 'very high' for many neighborhoods

GLENWOOD SPRINGS, Colo. - A new study has identified 15 neighborhoods in the Glenwood Springs area as having a "very high" vulnerability to wildfires.

Another neighborhood, Glenwood Highlands in West Glenwood, was given an extreme hazard rating in the Community Wildfire Protection Plan for the Glenwood Springs Fire Protection District.

In making its ratings, the study evaluates factors such as fuels, topography, structural flammability, access issues and availability of water for firefighting.

Some of the neighborhoods identified as being very high fire hazard areas include the eastern edge of the Roaring Fork Valley portion of Glenwood Springs, the Midland Avenue area, Canyon Creek, Three-Mile Road, No Name, various neighborhoods up Four-Mile Road, and much of West Glenwood.

The plan was prepared by Anchor Point Group Fire Management in Boulder. Glenwood fire marshal Ron Biggers said it probably cost \$40,000 to \$50,000, including preparation of a pre-attack plan that is designed to outline helicopter landing zones, water availability, anticipated fire spread and other considerations for firefighters should a fire strike near one of the neighborhoods.

Funding sources included the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, Colorado State Forest Service, State Farm Insurance and the Colorado State Hazard Mitigation Program, with the Glenwood Springs Fire Department also contributing money and staff time.

The plan outlines a range of methods for reducing the fire danger in the neighborhoods it studied, including reducing fire-prone vegetation to help create a defensible space around

Fire Ready employees Armando Martinez, left, and Alfredo Ocana work on pruning a spruce tree in West Glenwood in 2006. To help lessen the severity of a wildfire if one were to break out on the property, residents should thin, trim and cut back the landscape in order to create a defensible area.



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properties.

"An aggressive program of evaluating and implementing defensible space for homes will do more to limit fire-related property damage than any other single recommendation in this report," the study states.

Fire seminar

The Glenwood Springs Fire Protection District will present a free seminar on protecting homes from wildfire from 7 to 10 p.m. Tuesday, May 22. A PDF version of the plan is also available with this story at www.postindependent.com.

Residents can view the district's new Community Wildfire Protection Plan, learn about their home's risk, and hear how to minimize it through methods such as creating a defensible space and identifying a home and property's vulnerable spots where fire is most likely to ignite.

Presenters include Anchor Point Fire Management Group, Design Workshop, the Colorado State Forest Service and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

For more information call the Glenwood Springs Fire Department at 384-6433.

Glenwood Springs' general vulnerability to wildfires was exemplified in recent years by the 1994 Storm King Fire, which killed 14 firefighters, and the 2002 Coal Seam Fire, which destroyed some 30 homes.

The Glenwood fire department responded to 87 wildfires in what is called the wildland/urban interface from 2000-2003.

The area's elevations, steep topography, lack of multiple accesses up several valleys, and abundance of flammable fuels such as Gambel's oak all contribute to the threat to homes. The study shows that in extreme weather conditions, most wildlands in the Glenwood area would be vulnerable to fires that spread at an extremely rapid rate, exceed 12 feet in flame length and reach the crowns of trees.

The new plan evaluates 23 neighborhoods on the edge of wildlands in the Glenwood area, and gives 70 percent at least a very high hazard rating. Of the rest, all but one were given a moderate hazard rating. Springridge Place off Four-Mile Road is given a low rating as a result of factors including wide, dual-access roads; mostly flat lots; widely spaced homes; short grass as the dominant vegetation; and service by fire hydrants.

Glenwood Highlands has hydrants. But streets are steep, narrow and crowded by vegetation, and the neighborhood is served by only one access road.

"Most of the homes in this neighborhood would be quickly cut off by an ignition occurring in the heavy fuels below the road," the study says.

Homes there are built in the middle of steep slopes conducive to a fire's spread, and steep ravines with heavy amounts of oak brush sit below the subdivision, it says. Also, beetles have infested conifers in the neighborhood, creating standing dead wood.

Glenwood Springs attorney Glenn Chadwick and his wife, Kris, who is a Glenwood

Springs City Council member, live in the Highlands neighborhood. He said residents there have met repeatedly over the wildfire danger and taken steps such as removing beetle-killed trees and clearing out brush in ravines and on hillsides.

"All the neighbors have taken proactive steps. I think we've got a better situation than we did a few years ago," he said.

Biggers said community wildfire plans have become increasingly common over the last five years. The Coal Seam Fire helped prompt development of the Glenwood plan. The fire department already has been working with some neighborhoods and homeowners to reduce fire danger. For example, most residents on Walz Avenue along the edge of Red Mountain have done wildfire mitigation work, Biggers said.

Biggers hopes the new report prompts further action by neighborhoods at risk.

"It's more quantitative than us just saying, 'yeah, it's high fire danger' (in a neighborhood) and somebody says, 'how do you know?'"

In addition to promoting the concept of defensible space, the plan outlines other steps that can be taken, including better marking home addresses and routes for escaping fires by vehicle, reducing vegetation along escape routes, providing for multiple access routes, and adding water sources for firefighting.

Biggers said if homeowners take steps to reduce fire hazards, it may give further incentive to agencies to do similar work on adjacent public lands. Such efforts also can affect insurance rates and can be taken into consideration when fire departments are setting priorities with their limited resources during a fire, deciding which homes to try to protect and which probably can't be saved or are too risky to crews.

Biggers said the last step in the wildfire plan will be to rate the danger for individual homes.

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