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Hayden Lake

Neighbors



*Embers of
Solidarity*

East of Hayden Lake's
Collective Stand Against
the Threat of Wildfires

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Cover Photo by Terina Thompson Photography

An exclusive magazine serving the neighborhoods around one of the most beautiful lakes in North Idaho.

Embers of Solidarity:

East of Hayden Lake's Collective Stand Against the Threat of Wildfires

By Carly Agnew | Photos by Terina Thompson Photography and Catherine Hibbard, Ridge Creek Fire PIO

Last summer, nestled amidst the towering trees and untamed beauty of our region, a fierce adversary emerged: raging wildfires. As the flames licked at the edges of close-knit communities, remarkable stories unfolded - stories of unity, compassion, and unwavering support that showcased the true strength of our residents.

Driven by gusty winds and dry summer conditions, one of the hotspots—the Ridge Creek Fire—quickly became a menacing force threatening the homes of East of Hayden Lake residents. But they were ready. As a community, they were fire wise and ready to act with a strength that emerges when a community unites against the odds.



Here, in their own words, is the story of how the East of Hayden Lake Firewise community began:

We're building a cohesive community of neighbors who want to learn how to protect their homes against the threat of wildfire. It matters, because we live right next to 3.3 million acres of national forest that hasn't seen a major burn since the mid 1800s, plus 200 acres of state land that's managed in a manner that makes wildfire even more likely.

Karen's Story

After my family hired arborists to clean up our 100-acre tree farm, where we've lived for 34 years, it not only looked beautiful, it felt safer. It was a 100-acre firebreak, protecting not only us but our neighbors too.

So we asked Fire Marshal Tyler Drechsel (Northern Lakes Fire District) what else we could do, and he showed us simple, affordable ways we can further reduce our home's wildfire vulnerabilities. He told us that for some houses, major overhauls might be needed, such as replacing a damaged or combustible roof with composite shingles or metal. We learned that one of the most common causes of house-fires is red-hot embers riding on the wind from a fire miles away, quietly landing on roof, cedar deck, pine needles etc.

And, we learned that in a wildfire, triage comes into play: Homes whose wildfire vulnerabilities haven't been addressed are unlikely to survive and not worth risking firefighters' lives, so they are, quite legally, passed by.

We wanted our neighbors to benefit from all this! So I organized a neighborhood meeting. Drechsel and deputy Chris Larson addressed our standing-room-only crowd, and by the end of 2021 every applicant had gotten the required (and free) professional evaluation of their home's wildfire vulnerabilities, and we officially became the active, federally certified, nationally recognized East of Hayden Lake Firewise community, with 17 contiguous households covering about 700 acres.

A few months later I got a call from Tammy Pearson, whose neighborhood is just a mile south of ours. She asked if her more densely populated neighborhood could join us. I got permission from Idaho's Firewise liaison to say yes! Our growth has continued from there. As of this writing, we're over 100 households covering more than 1700 acres, and there's a teetering stack of about 70 new applicants, waiting for the next wave of home evaluations.

Tammy's Story:

I was born and raised in Idaho and have always been a "country, mountain loving" kind of gal at heart.

As a young teen I spent hours in the mountains, exploring, hiking and camping and have always just wanted to live a serene peaceful life with my family in a cozy home in the mountains. When my husband and I moved with our two children to North Idaho 30 years ago, my dream was to move out in the "wilds" with nothing but trees and wild-lands for neighbors. We have been very fortunate to have been able to purchase our property of four acres here on Hayden Lake, and after clearing it of trees and underbrush, we built that cozy home I always dreamed about. I could not have asked for a better place to have our grandchildren visit, and for the making of special memories and traditions that will be carried on in our family legacy.

With all the trees and natural vegetation around our home and throughout the neighborhood, the very hot and dry summers are worrisome, of course, and we've even had a neighbor lose their home to a fire, right in the hottest part of the summer. We were so lucky to have other neighbors that were on the ball and willing to help get the fire controlled, because our whole neighborhood could have been engulfed quickly, with the response times of emergency fire trucks being 30 minutes or more. Summer is always such a scary time, and as



more and more families move into the area and build homes the anxiety about fires increases.

When I first heard about the Firewise program and spoke to Karen about how it all worked; I knew it was exactly what we needed here in my neighborhood. I went door to door with my Firewise flyer and personally talked to neighbors and friends, making a list of everyone interested in the program. When I realized how eager everyone was to be included and how fast they started working on their own properties, it only made sense to continue spreading the word throughout the entire east side of Hayden Lake. The enthusiasm and support of all the new members of the Firewise community keeps me motivated and excited to share our program with more and more neighbors, so they too can become involved in making us all much more fire safe!

Karen and Tammy shared that what they love most about this project is that it's turned a smattering of clique-like small neighborhoods and isolated homeowners into an expanding and increasingly cohesive community.

"We know each other's names, we look after each other, yet we're still self-reliant, independent, WUI (Wildland Urban Interface) people – we all accept certain inconveniences for the privilege of living "in the sticks," where there's peace, quiet, privacy and very few unexpected knocks on the door. To the surprise of many, being official members of this Firewise community is the best of two worlds: We still have peace and privacy, and at the same time, all our members have our contact information, which is vital in any kind of emergency. Equally vital: nobody abuses that information. Respect for each other's privacy is a key part of WUI life."



Top: Fire crew member, Cameron Gianfala, waters a hot spot.



Right: Fire crews Construct a Dozer-Line Firebreak.

Want to learn more about becoming Firewise?
Visit www.nfpa.org/Education-and-Research/Wildfire/Firewise-USA today.



Terina Thompson
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Developing Bonds of a Firewise Community

Curated by Carly Agnew

Firewise USA is a national program governed by each state - and in East of Hayden Lake, by Tyre Holfeltz of the CDA office of Idaho Department of Lands.

Karen shared, "As we grow, we're increasingly well placed to receive grant funding that is strictly administered through IDL and the Office of Emergency Management. For example, in 2022 we were awarded a \$250,000 grant specifically for cleaning up private forestlands (exactly what my family did five years ago at our own expense)."

IDL appoints professional foresters to select- and with the owner's permission- thin, limb and de-shrub their private forests, mulching the slash. The result is gorgeous and quite obviously safer for everybody. Key to the selection process is bang for the buck: the greatest wildfire-squashing benefit for the most residents.

Here's why this program is working for the East of Hayden Lake community:

- There's nothing to lose and everything to gain. No dues. No hidden agenda. No personal records filed in government offices. Free access to expert advice and to significant grant funding.



- To its credit, the federal government figured it's cheaper, and infinitely more satisfying, to help us protect ourselves against wildfire rather than relying on FEMA to swoop in after we're burned down.
- We all learn, together, how to make our own homes safer- and learning together is great community building.
- Every member understands that gaps between our member properties can be significant sources of combustible fuel. So, doing this together is where the value is. A cohesive Firewise community, without gaps, is our superpower to defend against wildfire.
- During the Ridge Creek fire, Firewise leaders attended the Incident Command's daily briefings making sure each member of their community knew everything, the good and the bad: what the fire was doing, how it spent the night, how the weather would affect it, their evacuation status... In a crisis situation, reliable information is vital and because they were organized, everyone was updated regularly.
- Smoke on the horizon could be a wildfire, but it also could be a prescribed burn or a legal slash fire. Therefore, Firewise members are taught appropriate steps to follow when they see smoke and how to alert appropriate emergency services.
- It's possible to be independent and the member of a community of people who look out for one another. A potential wildfire was the motivator, but the system they've set up is applicable to any kind of emergency. And it is thriving, thanks to all the people who know each other's names.

Tammy added, "If you live on the east side of Hayden Lake, please consider joining us. If you're in more urban parts around the west and southwest sides of Hayden Lake, we'd be honored to help you jump-start your own Firewise community."

Whether you live in the country or the heart of town, learning how to protect your loved ones from fire is a great idea, and winter is one of the best times to get started! You can begin today by visiting www.firewise.org and www.nfpa.org. And if you're in their neighborhood and would like to connect, you can reach Karen at eastofhaydenlake@gmail.com or Tammy at buggsnladibug@msn.com.

Here's what members say:

"This Firewise community has supported and encouraged us to make our land more fire resistant and consequently more appealing visually. We have had excellent connections to information regarding fire safety, and daily info this summer about the Ridge Creek fire." - *Marty and Barb Mueller*

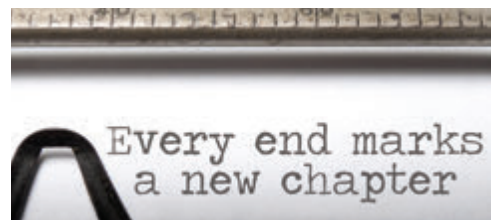
"After driving around East Hayden Lake for 42 years, seeing the changes in the community is refreshing. From noticing the clearing all along the road, to parking my car at home at Chicken Point and seeing the reduction in fire potential there, speaks highly of the East of Hayden Lake Firewise Community." - *Doug Rivard*

"This past summer was scary with the Ridge Creek Fire only 5 miles from many of our homes. We were on the "READY" alert to evacuate at any notice! The comforting factor is our entire community received daily reports on how the fire was progressing, and later, how it was being controlled. As a Firewise community, most of us had participated in making our own property more fire safe. That was also a comfort. And certainly knowing the daily status of the current fire helped us all rest easier. I doubt any of us would have liked going through this dreadful fire season alone. Thank you, FireWise, for the community reassurance." - *Lois Moore*

"Our family was most impressed by how our Firewise administrators were able to keep us so up-to-date on the fire and its movement. This was a frightening event, and the way they handled it made it so we could sleep at night. God bless you." - *Dr. Lee and Gaynell Coppess*

"Three things that I appreciate the most about being part of the Firewise Community: (1) Practical guidance—not directives—on how to take responsibility for keeping our own properties safer from the risk of wildfire, and defensible in the case of wildfire; (2) The direct communication during the active fire situation last summer was invaluable. So much better than some of the online sources which are not always up to date or pertinent to specific areas; and (3) Everything Karen and Tammy have done and are doing to keep this all together!" - *Janet Robnet*

"The East of Hayden Lake Firewise Community project fosters previously untapped community dialogue and cooperation in developing new fire protection strategies. Along the way it has provided us with education and ways to meet neighbors as well as make new friends." - *Donald Kruppa*





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