Ember alerts or media misinformation?

By Wayne Tyson

Up, up, up goes the smoke, and with it dreams and lives and insurance rates. Largely — unfortunately — for nothing.

Why?
I don't know, but these tragedies keep happening. Accidents, dumb stunts, arson and other idiocy always will be with us, as will wildland fires. Lives will be lost. These are the givens, inevitable.

But what need not continue to happen is the loss of homes — at least not at nearly the rate they continue to be burned.

Raging fire fronts and burned-out houses make dramatic television, and anchorwomen and men sagely proclaim that the fires were avoidable, the failures of hapless homeowners to “clear enough brush” or “have tile roofs.” A few make casual mention of “embers” or firebrands, but most imply that the fire front itself — those impressive flames — are the main culprit.

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Firebrands from structure fires are another matter, especially when the structure is fully involved. The variety of fuels, from asphalt to plastic to wood, can create larger and/or longer-lasting firebrands that can be thrust higher and farther in the stronger convection column produced by the much greater heat, which also is of longer duration than a wildland fire.

That greater heat and duration also mean that the separation distance for ignition by radiation is greater than a wildland fire. This fact is largely academic in most cases, however, as homes are commonly separated by only eight feet, more or less. Larger structures, such as mansions and apartments or condominium structures with multiple units, can be a real horror. Makes a wildland fire relatively tame.

In recent years, TV anchors have gotten the message about shake-shingle roofs, but they need to emphasize that it is firebrands, almost exclusively (if not entirely), that ignite those roofs. They also need to emphasize that any combustible surface also is susceptible.

While creating an adequate defensible space (complete clearing is rarely if ever necessary) of at least 30 feet from all combustible structures is important, the great emphasis placed on this practice has not only distracted attention from other important issues like the firebrand phenomenon, but also establishes a false sense of security. Clear the brush, and all will be well.

Wrong! The planting of so-called “fire-retardant” vegetation is similarly useful, true, but misleadingly simplistic. All vegetation will burn — it will burn explosively when its water content is boiled quickly off by a fire front — the important thing is the quantity of the fuel, not the species of plant.

Firebrands are the exclusive propagators of “spot” fires downwind of the fire front. “Downwind” can be in almost any direction, as the fire creates its own winds, even whirlwinds.

So while some TV anchors and reporters do mention firebrands or “embers,” this most important cause of structure ignitions needs much more emphasis. People need to understand the “why” of the actions recommended by the authorities, including the media. They need to know how impossible it is to save their homes when they are engulfed by millions of firebrands — or one even — in the wrong place.

They need to know that exposed flammable surfaces need to be minimized, and that they must have an onsite means (such as water storage, a pump and water delivery system that can operate by itself) of effectively preventing ignition of decks, fences and other structures that could in turn ignite their homes.

It is important that they have defensible space around their homes and rapid, safe access for fire suppression crews, but closed windows and gas valves and very fire resistant building and site design if they expect their home and its contents to survive a fire of any scale or origin.

Your home is still gone, whether it is the only one or one among hundreds. Don't let it happen. You owe it to yourself — and your neighbors.