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Living with Wildfire

By Linda Masterson

Losing your home and all your belongings in a wildfire is a terrible thing.

But living in canyon country and being ill-prepared for that unthinkable possibility is even worse. The Crystal Mountain fire in early April destroyed our home and everything in it, and left our 72-acre tree farm looking like the moon. Since the fire, my husband Cory Phillips and I have had so many people ask us what was it really like, how insurance worked, what we did right, what we wish we'd done differently that we thought passing along what we learned might help someone else be better prepared.

Living with the threat of wildfire is something every canyon resident has to come to grips with. The beetles have turned our once-green forests into a patchwork of red and brown as well as defiant green. If Mother Nature is stingy with snow and moisture, the trees that are alive are even less able to defend themselves. If you live in the canyons, the potential for a devastating wildfire is just another ticking time bomb fact of life. It was a chance we always thought was worth taking for the privilege of living somewhere so beautiful. Some 3,000 people live in the area covered by the Rist Canyon Volunteer Fire Department. At least ten homes were destroyed, and thirty people, including 11 kids, were left homeless. So the odds really are on your side. But I know everyone reading this is wondering "What if it were us?"

Insurance

We have good insurance with State Farm, and yet at the end of the day, we were woefully underinsured, as were most folks. Get out your policy and actually read it through; understand what your limits are for your home, your outbuildings, and your contents – insurance talk for everything in your house that would fall out if you turned your house upside down. Also check to see if you are covered for temporary living expenses, and the clean up and removal of debris, which can cost tens of thousands of dollars.

If you don't have insurance, get some if you possibly can. If it's too expensive, opt for a really high deductible.

Temporary Living

If your home burns to the ground, or is damaged enough to be uninhabitable, you're going to need a place to live. Staying with friends or relatives is an option, but you know what they say about houseguests. Having company for a couple of weeks is fine; not too many people want houseguests for a couple of years.

Our policy provided for up to two years of temporary living expenses; basically State Farm would rent us a place to stay and furnish it for us with the basic necessities. The two years part is kind of misleading; apparently the strict interpretation is two years if you are rebuilding. If we were twenty years old, maybe we'd consider rebuilding a primary home on our charcoaled ridgetop. But at our age, it just doesn't make sense. If you're not rebuilding, they want you to buy another home or otherwise decide what you want to do as soon as possible.

Insurance Math

Buying property elsewhere and building was also an option, but despite the real estate market, land is still expensive, and right now it costs at least 25% more to build than to buy an existing home – and that's without the land and infrastructure. So from a financial point of view, building just didn't make sense for us.

Our policy provided for 20% over our basic coverage for our home to account for inflation if we built another home. So if your home is insured for \$300,000, the 20% inflation coverage would give you an additional \$60,000 to work with. But you have to spend your inflation coverage to get it – they won't automatically just add it to your payout. And you can't count the cost of the land or infrastructure. The inflation coverage can also apply to making improvements if you buy an existing home, as we are doing. It's just kind of complicated and requires lots of paperwork and record keeping.

Your insurance policy most likely covers your home and outbuildings; it most likely does not cover your land, your cars and other motorized equipment, and the typical infrastructure that goes into making a piece of mountain property inhabitable – the well, the septic, the electric, the phone lines. After a fire, you will still own your property. If you're not zoned ag, after a certain grace period, unless you are rebuilding, you will be reclassified as vacant residential land, which is taxed at a higher rate than land with something on it.

You don't have to buy or build. You can just take your check (but not the inflation adjustment) and run off to the Caribbean. Or buy a motor home and drive around the country. Or throw it in the bank and rent an apartment.

Your Stuff

The contents of your home should have its own coverage amount; in our case it was a percentage of the building coverage, but it should be spelled out on your policy's face page or cover sheet. And here's something I was happy to learn: all those things we would have needed a rider to have covered in a lesser catastrophe were covered in full because we suffered what's referred to as a catastrophic loss. So everything from guns and firearms to antiques and art and jewelry were covered. The only items that still had limitations were things like cash, stamps and negotiable instruments, and business inventory.

We didn't need receipts or appraisals, because they were presumably all burned up in the fire. But you will need to document every single thing in the house and on your property, and if you have copies of appraisals, or if you had a rider for excess coverage on your policy, that will make your new job as a typist/clerk/accountant/researcher go a lot faster.

Our contents inventory ran to 2,400 items – over 100 pages – and covered everything from the food in our freezers (item by item) to the art on our walls. (Thanks, Nicki Rutt, for providing us with a record of what we'd bought at the auction!)

You need to list everything item by item, including where it came from (Home Depot, Grandma, whatever) how old it was, and the cost of replacement. This is the part that will make you very, very glad you have lots of pictures and notes. If you think you can remember everything you own, try this – sit down and try to list everything that's in your closet. Or your kitchen cupboards. Or your workshop. You will be astonished at how much you will forget. You will also be astonished at how much it costs to replace all this stuff.

Depreciation

Items that have a lifespan – which includes everything from electronics to jeans – will be depreciated when the adjuster goes through your contents. The only things that don't get depreciated are things that hold their value or appreciate, like jewelry, art, firearms, books and antiques. For not the first time in my life, I was very grateful that the vast majority of our possessions had been old, treasured family heirlooms, antiques and collectibles.

Experts recommend that to account for depreciation, the average person needs to go about 30% over the maximum amount listed for their contents. If you just didn't have that much stuff, and your policy provides for replacement value, what will happen is your contents check will include a payout for the value at the time of loss. So if your three year old TV that cost \$1,000 is now worth \$600, that's what you get paid. When you buy a new \$1,000 TV and submit the receipt, they'll pay you the additional \$400.

If you run a business out of your home, and have inventory or serious business equipment, you need to add a business rider to your policy, or you will not be fully covered.

Vehicles

Your cars and anything that goes with them, like snow tires or pick-up covers, are not generally covered under your home owners insurance. Our ATV was covered because it never left the property; we only used it to work on our tree farm. If you use your ATV recreationally, it's not covered unless you have it separately insured. Ditto for more serious farm equipment.

Getting Started

Call in your claim as soon as you can think straight; the sooner you get a number and get into the system, the better. We were escalated up to the large loss team, and assigned our own adjuster, who personally worked with us (is still working with us) through the process. He's the only person at State Farm we need to talk to, so you avoid swimming through miles of bureaucratic red tape on your own – he swims for you. Be forewarned, though, the swimming still takes much longer than either you or your adjuster think it will take. We got an advance almost immediately, but it took another ten weeks for them to pay us the rest of our building coverage, and we're expecting to wait another month or so for our contents coverage to be paid.

What's Your Home Worth?

Even if the adjuster can take one look at the before and after pictures and know that you will max out your coverage, he can't just write you a check. One of the adjuster's jobs is to reconstruct your house on paper, so he or she can put a value on it. If the reconstruction shows your home was worth as much or more than it was insured for, you'll eventually get your policy maximum. But if it wasn't, you'll only get what they work out the replacement cost to be, not necessarily what you're insured for. They figure replacement value on dollars per square foot to rebuild. Some things are estimated separately; State Farm had a landscape contractor put a value on our pond, patio and walkways.

Do You Know Where Your House Plans Are?

One of the first things our adjuster asked for was a copy of our building plans. Of course we had about ten copies under the bed in the guest room, but none in the fire bag. And it turns out the county does not have plans on file unless you built in the last year or two. So if you built your house, go find your plans and put them in your fire bag. We eventually got plans from our log supplier; our builder had gone out of business, and our architect only had the plans on a corrupt floppy disc.

Make Your Own Documentary

The 75 photos I was inspired to take the day before the fire came in very handy; it was easy for the adjuster to see our countertops, our floors, our appliances, our furniture and antiques. Everything from the type of floors you have to the kind of kitchen counters factor into the value per square foot your adjuster will work with. So help yourself out; make notes room by room and file them electronically. Put all your photos and your notes on a flash drive, and send it to a good friend or relative in a fire-free zone, or get a safe-deposit box at your bank, or a fire-proof safe. Update your photos every year or two. In this digital age, there's no excuse for not having records of everything.

Also take photos of your deck, porches, exterior landscaping, features like man-made ponds or water features, walkways, fences, and of course all types of outbuildings and structures; they'll be covered under a percentage of your home coverage. If you have

storage sheds or barns, take pictures inside and out. Cory would stare at one picture of our shed, trying to remember what was in a series of unmarked cardboard storage boxes. We never did figure it out.

Be Prepared

Designate a shelf in the garage or somewhere else easily accessible for your fire bag and other emergency stuff. I can't stress enough how little time there is. We had less than fifteen minutes, and spent most of it throwing bags we'd already packed into the car and calling our neighbors. Being prepared could make the difference between escaping with your life, and escaping with a few key things that could help you put your life back together.

Keep Your Data Safe

Back up your computer every day, and make sure you can get your hands on your backup drive in a flash. Even better, use a cyber back-up service, then if something happens while you're gone, your data will be safe. We rescued my laptop, but Cory's desktop was too cumbersome to even think about, and he didn't have a backup drive.

Keep all your important papers in one brightly colored file you can put your hands on in seconds, or in a fire-proof box you can grab and take with you. You'll want your address book, phone lists, calendars, passports, birth certificates, insurance info, doctors, dentists, prescriptions, medical records, banks, credit cards, passwords and anything else you don't have memorized.

Make Lists

I'd strongly recommend keeping your papers in something you can put your hands on and throw into the car in seconds. But realistically, who is going to keep all their sentimental treasures and a change of underwear in a bag six or eight months of the year? So you might want to think about having everyone in the family sit down and make a list of what they would want to take. Type the lists in a nice, big typeface and put them somewhere you can instantly find them.

Don't Rely on 911

We know people who were evacuated but never received a reverse 911 call. We checked our voicemail the next day from the evacuation center. Our call had come in well after midnight. Firefighters who were monitoring the scene from another development told us that by then our house was on fire. I'd strongly suggest getting together with neighbors and working out a phone tree or some other system of letting people know "This isn't a false alarm." Our scanner was our lifeline; we kept it tuned in, so we knew what was going on at the scene. When we heard Carol Dollard say "It's gone," we knew it was time to be prepared to flee in minutes.

Don't Stay and Defend Your Home

If you're thinking about staying and defending your home, take a look at what remains of ours. And think about this: firefighters watching the ball of super-heated gases roar towards our neighbors the Pedersens reported that when the fire got within fifty feet, their home burst into flames from the heat. You can't defend against a fire ball a third of a mile high being pushed by hurricane-force winds. All you can do is leave, and be grateful you got out alive.

Things I wished I'd packed:

The charm bracelets I'd had since I was a teenager. My Dad's Marine Corps paratrooper wings and the bullet he brought back from the war, and the rocking horse he made me when I was a child. My baby book; Cory's baby shoes, our wedding album and all the rest of our old photo albums, the quilted Christmas tree skirt his Mom made for us and the Christmas stocking I've hung up every year since I was born. The things you'll miss the most won't be the things that cost the most. They'll be the things no amount of money can replace. I couldn't have taken everything, but I sure wish I'd taken another hour or two that Saturday and packed a few more memories, instead of convincing myself it was going to be another false alarm, and I'd just be unpacking everything again.

Your Next Life

Losing your home and everything you own is such a profoundly life-altering experience it's hard even for me to find words to describe it. There's just a huge, gaping hole where your life used to be. When people ask if you need anything, it's hard to know what to say. Because you need everything. During those first terrible weeks our friends and families were the glue that held us together. We would have crumbled without their constant help and support.

When the mental fog began to clear, Cory and I decided that since Mother Nature had wiped our slate clean, we were going to look at it as an opportunity to reinvent ourselves from the ground up. Because looking backwards gets you nowhere. We've bought a home north of Fort Collins and are hoping to move in early fall. We have to buy everything from silverware to beds before we can move in. Scouring the sales and haunting the thrifts and antique stores has turned into a full time job.

We went back up to the remains of our home in early June with our good friends the Ewings to see if there was anything that could be salvaged, or if we should move ahead with clean up and demolition.

I've always shopped year round for gifts. I stored my treasures in a cupboard in a corner of the basement. LaVonne was over in that corner rooting around when she unearthed a beautiful green pottery vase. Part of the glaze was melted off, but otherwise it was just fine. And here's the strangest thing of all. I'd bought that vase as a gift for her.

Of course, now she won't take it. It's going to have a place of honor in our new home. It survived, just like we did. And it will go on, a bit rough around the edges, just like we will.

About the author: Linda Masterson and husband Cory Phillips lived on their 72-acre tree farm near Masonville, Colorado. Their home and property was destroyed in the Crystal Mountain fire in April, 2011. Linda is the author of *Living with Bears: A Practical Guide to Bear Country*. Visit www.livingwithbears.org for more info.