WILDFIRE RESEARCH FACT SHEET

Fire Spread on Ember-Ignited Decks

Wind-blown embers generated during wildfires are the single biggest hazard wildfires pose to homes, and homeowners should never overlook the potential risk that an attached deck can create. Recent testing by the Insurance Institute for Business & Home Safety (IBHS) offers important findings that can help minimize risk from wind-blown embers to decks.

Nothing that can ignite should be stored under a deck. This action, along with development of effective and well-maintained home ignition zones, will minimize the chance of all but a wind-blown ember exposure to your deck. An ignited deck can result, for example, in the ignition of combustible siding, or glass breakage in a sliding glass door.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH TESTS

IBHS's tests evaluated how an ember-ignited fire on an attached deck can spread to the home, and yielded important guidance to minimize the chance of fire spread to the house. Tests showed that the fire was typically small (Figure 1), sometimes just smoldering (not flaming). It spread slowly, taking more than an hour to travel the 4 to 6 feet from the ignition point to the home. Research from IBHS showed all ember-ignited deck fires occurred in the gaps between deck boards and initially started as a small smoldering fire that transitioned to a flaming fire. Although these small fires self-extinguished during IBHS tests that did not include any wind, wildfires almost always involve elevated wind speeds. During lab tests, even mild wind speeds of 12 mph, enabled fires to spread. Under certain conditions, the small fire did grow, always in the under-deck area (see Figure 2). Our results demonstrated that fire growth occurred in the under-deck area when joist spacing was 8" to 12", less than the typical 16".

Wind blowing against a building has a return flow component, so if fire were able to burn to the home, it would have to travel there as a backing fire, or against the wind. Research shows the "fuel" has to be close together for this to occur. That "fuel" could be the deck boards, or a combination of deck boards and support joists.

HOW DOES THE FIRE SPREAD?

IBHS tests demonstrated that fire spreads both toward, and away from, the house regardless of the deck board's orientation (parallel or perpendicular). When deck boards were perpendicular to the building, the fire would spread in the gap between boards. The 1/8" gap between deck boards was narrow enough for the fire to continue burning into the unburned wood (the fuel), in both directions from the ignition point. The fire spread pattern was more complicated when deck boards were parallel to the test building. In this case, fire could spread parallel to the test building, or directly to it. Fire spread directly to the building included a smoldering mode that occurred in the space between the top of the joist and the bottom of the deck board. Flaming combustion occurred when smoldering reached a gap between deck boards. Lateral flame spread can result in the ignition of joist members, resulting in fire growth.

IMPORTANCE of the HOME IGNITION ZONES

To minimize the possibility of deck ignitions, reduce fuels in the home ignition zones by carefully selecting and positioning vegetation and implementing regular maintenance. Pay particular attention to the area under the footprint of the deck, where storage of combustible materials should be avoided.

Although there are noncombustible deck board and decking options, many of the commercially available deck board products are combustible. IBHS research on deck materials is available at: disastersafety.org/ibhs/wildfire-ignition-potential-decks-subjected-ember-exposure.

CONSTRUCTION RECOMMENDATIONS

IBHS research shows that, for medium density softwood decking products (such as redwood and cedar), which can be vulnerable to ignition from embers, the associated fire spread on the deck can be minimized by the following:

1. Increase the gap between deck boards from 1/8 inch to 1/4 inch.

Fire spread in the gap between deck boards. Note the small flame burned all the way to the test building.

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2. Increase joist spacing from 16 inches to 24 inches.

Narrow joist spacing was a condition that could result in fire growth in the under-deck area.

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3. Apply a foil-faced self-adhering adhesive flashing tape (foil-faced bitumen tape) on the top of each joist.

Using a foil-faced self-adhering bitumen flashing tape reduces flame spread by removing the joist as a fuel source for both parallel and perpendicular deck board installations.

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SKYLIGHTS

WILDFIRE RESEARCH FACT SHEET

Skylights can compromise a home's ability to survive a wildfire when precautions are not implemented to prevent them from being an entry point for embers and/or flames.

Construction Materials/Placement

During a wildfire, a skylight can be vulnerable if subjected to an extended radiant heat exposure, or to flames when embers have ignited vegetative debris on top of the skylight. Most guidance recommends using a flat glass skylight rather than a plastic dome style because the plastic is combustible. However, there are situations, based on the slope of the roof, where a flat glass could be more vulnerable.

Vegetative debris can more easily land and stay on a low-slope roof, leading to increased risks. As seen in **Photos 1 and 2** of a low-slope roof, debris is more likely to accumulate on top of a flat glass skylight, and less likely to accumulate on a plastic dome skylight. Typical flame temperatures resulting from a wind-blown ember ignition of the debris would be high enough to break even tempered glass, the type of glass commonly used as the outer pane in a flat glass skylight.

Steep-Slope Roofs

Flat skylights are less vulnerable on a steep-slope roof because vegetative debris is less likely to accumulate. A steep-slope roof will act more like an exterior wall in terms of its response to a radiant heat exposure. Because of this increased resistance of glass over plastic to a radiant heat exposure, a glass skylight is a better choice on steep-slope roofs. The vulnerability of a domed skylight will depend on the potential for an extended radiant heat exposure, which in turn depends on the amount of vegetation and other combustibles near it **(Photo 3)**.

Dual-Pane Glass Benefits

Newer skylights feature dual-pane systems, like multi-pane windows in an exterior wall. The outer pane uses tempered glass and the inner pane uses laminated safety glass. This type of skylight is less likely to fail.

Maintenance

Both domed and flat skylights have similar framing systems (bases). Each uses a metal flashing to protect the wood framing members from both moisture- and ember-related damage **(Photo 4)**. This flashing helps the skylight survive when threatened, but should be maintained to avoid risks.

Prior to an Evacuation

Similar to windows, skylights that can open should be closed when a wildfire threatens. They also should incorporate a screen to resist the intrusion of embers in case the skylight happens to be left open **(Photo 5)**.

Photo 1. Accumulation of vegetative debris on top of a glass-type skylight on a low-slope roof.

Photo 2. Minimal accumulation of vegetative debris accumulated on these dome-type skylights on this low-slope roof.

Photo 3. The vulnerability of skylights on a steep-slope roof will depend on the potential for an extended radiant heat exposure to the roof and skylight unit.

Photo 4. Metal flashing protects the framing members of a skylight from moisture, a direct ember ignition, or flames from ember-ignited vegetation debris.

Photo 5. Operable skylights should be closed when a wildfire threatens. Similar to windows, they should incorporate a screen to resist the intrusion of embers (also good for insects!).

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WILDFIRE RESEARCH FACT SHEET

EXTERIOR SPRINKLER SYSTEMS

Are exterior sprinkler systems an option for protecting a home during a wildfire, after residents have evacuated the property?

Functionality and Installation

The function of an exterior sprinkler system is to minimize the opportunity for ignition by wetting the home and surrounding property. Sprinkler systems should be able to protect a home against the three basic wildfire exposures: wind-blown embers, radiant heat and direct flame contact.

Sprinklers systems can be mounted in one or more locations, including:

- The roof (Photo 1).
- Under the eave at the edge of the roof.
- On the property, in which case the sprinklers are directed at the home from multiple locations surrounding it.

Ember ignition of combustibles located on or near the home can result in a radiant and/or flame contact exposure (Photo 2). Water should reach all vulnerable areas for the system to have maximum effect both on and near the home (Photo 3).

Potential Issues

Post-fire assessments have shown exterior sprinkler systems can be effective in helping a home survive a wildfire, but potential issues exist with their use. These issues include:

- The water supply should be adequate to deliver water, when needed, for the time embers could threaten a home. This period could be up to 8 hours.
    - Check with your local fire department if your sprinkler system uses water from a municipal supply; they may have suggestions to help minimize water consumption.
- The effectiveness of a sprinkler system is questionable when a neighboring home is burning, since this would result in an extended radiant heat and/or contact exposure to the home.
- These systems can be activated manually or by an automated device, such as a sensor that detects heat or flame, or by an SMS-enabled cell phone. The ability of these systems to activate based strictly on an ember exposure has not been determined. Since wind-blown embers can be transported for up to a mile from the flame front of a wildfire, this may be a limitation.
- The most threatening wildfires occur during high-wind events and the homeowner should consider how the distribution/transport of water droplets may be influenced by elevated wind speeds.

Recommendations

Given the potential issues regarding performance, it's recommended that use be a supplement to, and not a replacement for, already proven mitigation strategies, such as the reduction of potential fuels throughout the home ignition zones, along with removal of roof and gutter debris, and use of noncombustible and fire/ember-ignition resistant building materials and installation design details.

Photo 1. Roof mounted sprinkler.

Photo 2. In order to be effective, external sprinklers must be able to wet all areas where ignition can occur, or be sufficiently effective in quenching embers that approach the home so they won't have enough energy to ignite combustible items.

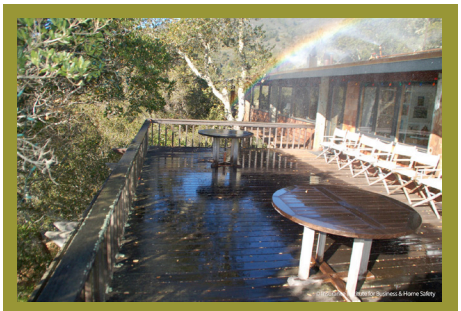

Photo 3. Roof-edge mounted sprinkler. Note these sprinklers did not deliver water in the near-home area. With this scenario, a sufficient number of wind-blown embers would have to be quenched in order to avoid ignition of the siding and decking in this zone, particularly at the deck-to-wall intersection.

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WILDFIRE RESEARCH FACT SHEET

IMMEDIATE (NONCOMBUSTIBLE) ZONE

Why is it important to create and maintain 5 feet of noncombustible space around the exterior of a building?

Wildfire risks are on the rise, but there are ways home and business owners can take control of their vulnerabilities. Changes made to a structure and its surroundings within 100 feet can make a big impact. Research from the Insurance Institute for Business and Home Safety (IBHS) shows that the first 0 to 5 feet around the structure, known as the immediate zone or noncombustible zone, has the greatest impact on your risk. IBHS and the National Fire Protection Association® (NFPA®) recommend keeping this zone well-maintained and clear of combustible materials.

IBHS Research

The main objective of the 0-to-5-foot zone is to reduce the potential that embers landing near a building will ignite fuels and expose the area around a home to a direct flame (Figure 1). Removing anything that can ignite from embers is critically important. To verify how effective a 5-foot noncombustible zone is around a building, more than 180 tests were conducted in 2018 at the IBHS Research Center to evaluate fire behavior and heating of buildings (Figures 2a & 2b).

Key Observations

- For combustible landscaping, such as wood mulch, the thickness of the mulch bed, wind speed, and location of the flame and building all impact the potential of mulch to ignite and how quickly fire can spread to the building.
- Burning mulch generates embers that can ignite nearby mulch, increasing the chances of direct flame contact spreading to the building.
- When flames are 5 feet away, a building's surface temperature is below temperatures that could cause ignition. However, corners of a building (45-degree angles) experience a higher temperature when exposed to flames, even when a 5-foot space is present. Testing showed that corners can be more vulnerable due to fire spread through fuel (such as mulch) on the ground, because at the same wind speed, wind blowing directly at a wall (90-degree angle) will result in taller flames and more radiant heat, while wind on a corner (45-degree angle) will result in longer flames that are closer to the ground.

Recommendations

- Keep the corner areas of a building clear of combustible materials due to the higher probability of having direct flame touching the surrounding ground.
- Keep gutters free of debris and use metal gutters.
- Install hard surfaces, such as a concrete walkway, or use noncombustible mulch products, such as rock.
- Keep the lawn well irrigated and use low-growing herbaceous (non-woody) plants. Shrubs and trees are not recommended in the 5-foot zone.
- Remove dead vegetation and implement a maintenance strategy to keep the 5-foot zone clear of dead plant materials.
- Mitigating home ignition zones shouldn't stop at 5 feet from the building. It should be combined with the footprint of an attached deck and area that extends away from the building up to 100 feet or to the property line.

Figure 1 – Creating and maintaining home ignition zones (defensible space) around your property are proven ways to reduce risks of property damage during a wildfire, as tests at the IBHS Research Center have shown.

Figure 2a Experiments conducted at the IBHS Research Center to study the effectiveness of creating a noncomsbutible space around buildings.

Figure 2b Embers impacting a building: left side with combustible (wood) and the right with noncombustible (rock) mulch.

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Learn More

- For online training and other resources, see nfpa.org/firewise.
- Access the latest research from IBHS at ibhs.org.

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Fencing

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Material, Installation and Maintenance Choices

NONCOMBUSTIBLE FENCING PRODUCTS REDUCE POTENTIAL HOME IGNITIONS

Many wildfire educational programs, along with the Insurance Institute for Business & Home Safety (IBHS) recommend noncombustible fencing products when placed within five feet of a building. As a necessary component, fencing located within the zero to five-foot noncombustible zone should be constructed of noncombustible materials.

A noncombustible zone minimizes the likelihood of wind-blown embers igniting fine fuels (such as bark mulch) located close to the building. Ember-ignited mulch can result in a radiant heat and/or flaming exposure to the building's exterior. Using noncombustible fencing where it attaches to the building reduces the opportunity of a burning fence igniting the exterior of the structure. Fencing products are often available in eight-foot pieces and use of that full section of noncombustible material is recommended. Observations made during the 2012 Waldo Canyon fire in Colorado Springs, CO provided evidence that burning fencing generates embers that can result in additional ignitions down-wind.

PERIMETER FENCING

When neighboring buildings are located within 20 feet of each other, use of steel fencing for the perimeter area can serve as a radiant barrier, providing added protection should a neighboring building ignite and burn. Research in Australia demonstrated the ability of panelized steel fencing to resist a radiant heat exposure.

RESEARCH FINDINGS TO HELP AVOID FENCE IGNITIONS

Recent research conducted by IBHS and the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), both independently and in a collaborative project, provided additional information about the vulnerability of combustible fencing.

Photo Captions:

- **A** Flame spread to the building when combustible debris was at the base of the fence.
- **B** Gates made from noncombustible materials should be used where a fence is attached to the home. Source: University of California, Agriculture and Natural Resources
- **C** Ignition from ember accumulation at the intersection of the vertical planks and horizontal support member.

RESEARCH FINDINGS:

1. Use a noncombustible fence section when it's attached to a building.
2. The area at the base of the fence should be kept clear of debris. Flame spread to the building will be more likely if fine vegetative fuels (e.g., pine needles, leaf litter and small twigs) have accumulated. Avoid placement of combustible mulch near the fence.
3. A fence design that allows for greater air flow, such as a single panel lattice fence, makes it more difficult for wind-blown embers to accumulate at plank, or lattice panel to horizontal support locations. If an ignition occurs, it's also more difficult for lateral flame spread to occur in the fencing material. Fence ignitions from wind-blown embers are more likely to occur at locations where vertical fencing planks attach to horizontal support members. The most vulnerable fencing from this perspective is a "privacy" fence, where the fence planks are on the same side as the horizontal support members.
4. A fence built from lattice that's applied to both sides of the support posts may be desired for privacy or other landscaping purposes, but should be avoided in wildfire-prone areas. Recent research at NIST has demonstrated that fire growth and lateral flame spread are much greater in this design style.
5. Vinyl fencing is not vulnerable to ember exposures alone, but did burn when subjected to flaming exposures from burning debris. Vinyl fencing will deform if subjected to radiant heat.

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WILDFIRE RESEARCH FACT SHEET

Under-Eave Construction

The under-eave area of a house is often overlooked when addressing vulnerabilities that can cause damage or loss during a wildfire. Neglecting this structural component increases susceptibility to heat from flames, which can become trapped, allowing fire to spread through attic vents and into the attic. Embers lodged in gaps between blocking and joists can also result in ignition and fire entry into the attic.

TYPES OF UNDER-EAVE CONSTRUCTION

Open-Eave Construction: Roof rafters visibly extend out beyond the exterior wall. This option is typically less expensive and is commonly found in many parts of the U.S.

Soffited-Eave Construction: Material connecting and enclosing the space between the edge of the roof and the exterior wall.

SOFFITED-EAVE CONSTRUCTION IS BEST FOR HOMES WITH A WILDFIRE RISK

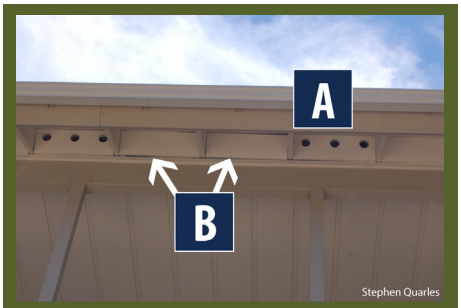
Wildfire research conducted by IBHS supports the use of soffited-eave construction. Additional research and guidance (e.g., FEMA P-737, Home Builder's Guide to Construction in Wildfire Zones - Fact Sheet No.6 **https://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/20130726-1652-20490-2869/fema_p_737_fs_6.pdf)** also suggests a soffited design as the best option. Vents located in the under-eave area can be entry points for embers and flames when limited effort has occurred to reduce risks in the home ignition zones (particularly in the near-home zone). Embers entering an attic can ignite stored combustible materials. Research has shown that open-eaves are more vulnerable to both ember entry and direct flame contact exposures, relative to soffited-eaves.

With open eaves, use a sealant (such as caulking) to cover gaps, or enclose the underside of the roof overhang. In open-eave construction, embers can and do accumulate between blocking and joists and can ignite these members if sufficient accumulation occurs.

The open-eave blocking likely included vents, so remember to add an adequate amount of soffit vents as part of the project. Make sure the vent area ratio (vent into the enclosed soffit and enclosed soffit into the attic) follows the requirements of local building codes.

Time-to-ignition is faster with under-eave construction and lateral flame spread is quicker, exposing other areas along the length of the home. (Using the recommended 0 to 5-foot noncombustible near-home zone minimizes the likelihood of an ignition at the base of the exterior wall.)

Using noncombustible or ignition-resistant materials to enclose the eave is recommended. The enclosure should extend from the roof edge horizontally back to the exterior wall. The horizontal soffit member is attached to a ledger board that is itself attached to the exterior wall.



Open-eave construction with vents in blocking (A), and gaps between blocking and other wood members in the under-eave area (B).

Flame impingement exposure to the underside of the eave, and time-to-ignition of the joists, blocking and fascia was quicker; and lateral flame spread faster, when an open-eave design was used in research experiments.

Lateral flame spread was reduced when a combustible soffit material ignited in this test of a soffited-eave with a combustible soffit material.

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WILDFIRE RESEARCH FACT SHEET

Reduce the Vulnerability of Your Deck to Wildfire

Photo Captions:

- **A** Embers that pass through deck board gaps will land on the ground, or on combustible materials stored under the deck, as shown during this IBHS test.
- **B** The near home noncombustible zone that surrounds the foundation should include a noncombustible area underneath the deck.
- **C** Vegetative debris in between deck board gaps will make this location even more vulnerable to ember accumulation.

MANY HOMES LOCATED IN WILDFIRE-PRONE AREAS HAVE ATTACHED DECKS, WHICH CAN POTENTIALLY SPREAD FIRE TO THE HOUSE WHEN IGNITED DURING A WILDFIRE.

A burning deck can ignite siding or break the glass in doors or windows, allowing fire to gain entry into the house. Consequently, making decks less vulnerable to wildfire also makes your house less vulnerable. Reducing the deck's vulnerability requires an approach that focuses on the materials and design features used to build the deck, and creating a noncombustible zone around and under the deck.

EMBER EXPOSURE AND IGNITION

Walking surfaces of decks are either solid surface or constructed using deck boards (with between board gaps). Solid surface decks are commonly light weight concrete or tile. Combustible deck board types include: solid wood and wood-plastic composites (these products are more widely used than noncombustible deck boards). Noncombustible deck board types include: metal and fiber cement.

Recent testing at the IBHS Research Center showed embers mostly lodge between deck board gaps and where deck boards rest on joists. Embers can accumulate and potentially ignite decking and combustible joists. Embers can also fall through board gaps and land on materials stored beneath the deck. It's critical to remove all combustible materials from the under-deck area to minimize the opportunity for ignitions; where resulting flames would impinge on the decking (some wood-plastic decking products are vulnerable to flaming exposures).

IBHS tests also showed that even without vegetative debris in between deck gaps, medium density softwood decking products, such as redwood or western redcedar are vulnerable to ember ignitions. Most wood-plastic composites, along with higher density tropical hardwood, and fire-retardant treated decking products are less vulnerable to embers. The vulnerability to embers in these locations is a reminder to remove debris that accumulates in these areas.

BUILDING CODE REQUIREMENTS

The International Wildland Urban Interface Building Code (IWUIC) and the California Building Code are the most commonly referenced construction codes for wildfire-prone areas; both include requirements that focus on the walking surfaces of decks. Noncombustible products are allowed by both codes.

The California Code provides provisions for accepting combustible decking products. These types of products are more commonly used by homeowners living in wildfire-prone areas across the country. Their requirement governs the amount of heat released when combustible decking is ignited by a gas burner. This mimics burning debris that could be located under the deck, or burning vegetation impinging on the underside of the deck, but does not mimic ember exposure. Combustible decking products that comply with the California Code can be found at: http://osfm.fire.ca.gov/licensinglistings/licenselisting_bml_searchcotest.

The IWUIC prohibits common combustible deck boards with the exception of fire-retardant treated decking (rated for outdoor exposure) and other materials that meet the requirements of an Ignition Resistant Material. However, as of this date, no other materials meet these requirements. The IWUIC allows an enclosed deck option that uses a horizontal construction attached to the bottom of the deck joists. This option should only be used with a solid surface deck. Using this option with deck boards (and the associated gaps), will cause moisture-related degradation problems (corrosion of fasteners and wood rot). Water from rain or melting snow will easily get into the enclosed space and will have a much harder time getting out.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR YOUR DECK:

1. Combustible materials should not be stored beneath decks. This will effectively create a noncombustible zone under the entire footprint of the deck.
2. Routinely remove debris that accumulates in between deck board gaps and debris that can accumulate at the intersection between the deck and house.
3. If the deck is a non-fire-retardant treated softwood deck, consider removing and replacing deck boards within a few feet of the house. Be careful to match the deck board thickness.
4. When building new decks, select deck boards that comply with the California Building Code requirements. If using wood joists, cover the top and part of the sides with a foil-faced bitumen tape product.

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WILDFIRE RESEARCH FACT SHEET

Coatings

Product types, application requirements and performance limitations

Buildings threatened by wildfire can be mitigated through the development of a strategy that addresses the built environment, vegetation, and other combustible materials on the property. Use of noncombustible materials and ember-resistant design features are examples of strategies that reduce the vulnerability of homes to wildfire. The use of coatings has been suggested as a strategy to provide enhanced protection against extended radiant heat and flame contact exposures for homes located in wildfire-prone areas, particularly when a combustible siding product is installed and other homes are nearby. In these cases, it can be argued that applying a coating is a less expensive option than replacing a combustible product with one that is noncombustible.

COMMON USE OF COATINGS

The term "coatings" is a generic term referring to products that are applied to various building components. These building components can be combustible or noncombustible materials and are used to provide added protection from various environmental factors. The most common use for coatings applied on wood, and wood-based products, is to provide protection from water or water vapor where the coating reduces the rate that moisture enters and leaves. Depending on additives and the chemical makeup, coatings can also improve the fire retardancy or fire resistance of the wood or other combustible material.

GELS

Another example of a coating is what's commonly referred to as a "gel." Gels are water absorbent polymers that can be applied to a building component to provide temporary protection from radiant heat or flames. You may have heard of these products being applied to homes when a wildfire is threatening. Once applied, the absorbed water starts to evaporate, whether or not the wildfire actually arrives, and therefore the time that a gel coating is effective is limited. The effective time is on the order of hours.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the current performance limitations of coatings, we recommend other proven mitigation strategies to reduce the vulnerabilities of homes to wildfire, such as using ember-resistant design features and creating and maintaining the home ignition zones. For more information visit: disastersafety.org/wildfire

Photo Captions:

A Gel product applied to wood siding.

B Using a wet-film gauge to ensure the film thickness is adequate.

INTUMESCENT PAINTS

A common example of a coating providing enhanced performance when exposed to fire is intumescent paints (i.e., they form a film when dry). When an intumescent coating is heated by elevated levels of radiant heat, or flames, it can swell up to 20 times the original dry-film thickness; creating an insulation layer that protects the combustible building component.

Intumescent coatings are commonly used in interior applications. However, caution is advised - when these products are used in an exterior application. Researchers at the USDA Forest Service Forest Products Laboratory reported that fire-retardant coatings have an uncertain "shelf life" when used in an exterior location and would therefore need to be reapplied regularly.

If an intumescent coating is being considered, ensure the manufacturer has provided test results demonstrating enhanced performance, either after a defined accelerated weathering period or an extended natural weathering period. Acknowledging their uncertain performance when used in exterior applications, the use of coatings is not allowed for compliance with provisions of the California Building Code, Chapter 7A, which provides requirements for building in wildfire-prone areas in California.

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WILDFIRE RESEARCH FACT SHEET

Attic and Crawl Space Vents

Windblown embers can enter attics and crawl spaces through vents.

INSTALLING THE RECOMMENDED MESH SCREENING AND ELIMINATING STORAGE IS CRITICAL TO REDUCING BUILDING IGNITIONS DURING A WILDFIRE.

VENTS IN ATTICS AND CRAWL SPACES

Attic and crawl space vents, and other openings on the vertical wall of a home, serve important functions, including providing ventilation to remove unwanted moisture from these typically unoccupied spaces and oxygen for gas appliances such as hot water heaters and furnaces. Wind-blown embers are the principal cause of building ignition and can readily enter these spaces, which are often hot and dry. Providing air for ventilation, while also keeping out embers can present a dilemma. Dry materials are more easily ignited by embers, so limiting the entry of embers into attic spaces is critical. Adding to the problem are the combustible materials we tend to store in these spaces (e.g., cardboard boxes, old clothes and other combustible materials) because embers accumulate against them and they can be easily ignited.

HOW VENTS FUNCTION

Ventilated attic spaces have openings in two locations. Inlet air comes from vents located in the under-eave area at the edge of your roof. Exiting air leaves through vents located on the roof or at the gable ends of your home. If your home is built over a crawl space, you will typically have vents on each face of your home to provide cross-ventilation. Experiments conducted at the IBHS Research Center demonstrated that regardless of whether a vent had an inlet or outlet function, when wind blows against its face, it is an inlet vent. Therefore, any vented opening on your home should be able to resist the entry of embers. Unvented attic and crawlspace designs are available for some areas of the country. These designs are more easily implemented with new construction. Check with local building code officials to see if this is an option where you live.

USE MESH SCREENING TO REDUCE EMBER ENTRY INTO VENTS

Building codes require vent openings to be covered by corrosion resistant metal screens, which are typically 1/4-inch to keep out rodents. However, research shows that embers can pass through 1/4-inch mesh and ignite combustible materials, particularly smaller materials such as saw dust. Embers also can enter smaller screening, such as 1/16-inch, but cannot easily ignite even the finer fuels; however, this size screening is more easily plugged with wind-blown debris and is easily painted over if you are not careful when re-painting your house. Installing 1/8-inch mesh screening is suggested in wildfire prone areas, as it effectively minimizes the entry of embers. It's important to note that 1/8-inch screening only minimizes the size and number of embers and does not eliminate them entirely; making it very important to reduce what's stored in the attic and crawl space.

BEST CHOICES FOR VENTS TO RESIST EMBER ENTRY:

1. For (under-eave) inlet vents, opt for a soffited eave design. IBHS research demonstrates that gable end vents and other vent openings are vulnerable to wind-blown embers when the face of the vent is perpendicular to the wind flow, while embers are less likely to pass through vents with a face that is parallel to the wind flow. Therefore, soffited eave construction is preferred to open eave.

2. For outlet vents, opt for a ridge that is rated to resist wind driven rain. These vents have an external baffle at the vent inlet. Vents that have been approved for use by the California Office of the State Fire Marshal.

3. Turbine vents also help keep embers out, but you should attach a piece of 1/8-inch mesh to the bottom of the roof sheathing at the opening for the vent.

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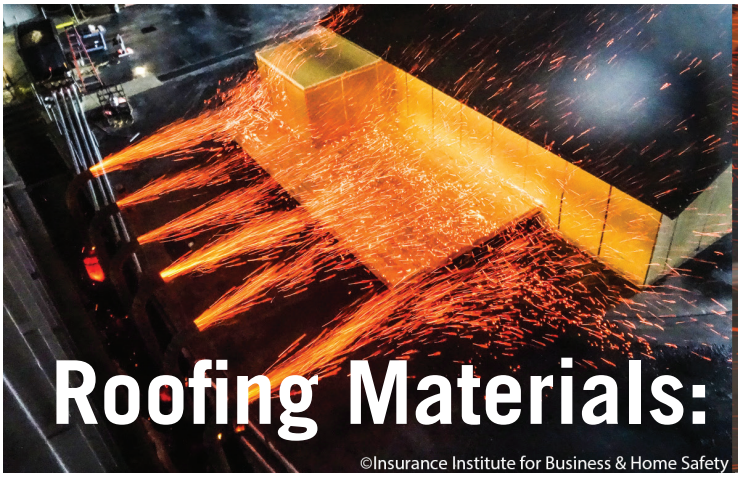

Roofing Materials:

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WILDFIRE RESEARCH FACT SHEET

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Roofs are a highly vulnerable part of a home during wildfires

HOMEOWNERS NEED TO IMPLEMENT RISK REDUCTION ACTIONS THAT MAKE HOMES BETTER ABLE TO SURVIVE A WILDFIRE - AND THE ROOF IS A GREAT PLACE TO BEGIN!

HOW HOMES IGNITE

Homes ignite in one of three ways: embers/firebrands, radiant heat exposure or direct flame contact. An example of an ember ignition is when wind-blown embers accumulate on combustible materials such as a wood shake roof. An untreated wood shake or shingle roof covering is the greatest threat to a home.

ROOF COVERINGS AND ASSEMBLIES

Roof covering fire ratings are Class A, B, C, or unrated; with Class A providing the best performance. Common Class A roof coverings include asphalt fiberglass composition shingles, concrete and flat/barrel-shaped tiles. Some materials have a "by assembly" Class A fire rating which means, additional materials must be used between the roof covering and sheathing to attain that rating. Examples of roof coverings with a "by assembly" fire rating include aluminum, recycled plastic and rubber and some fire-retardant wood shake products. If a wood shake roof does not have the manufacturer's documentation specifying the fire retardant, assume it's untreated.

TILE AND ROOF COVERINGS WITH GAPS BETWEEN THE COVERING AND ROOF DECK

Flat and barrel-shaped tiles, metal, and cement roof coverings can have gaps between the roof covering and sheathing, which typically occur at the ridge and edge of roofs. These openings can allow birds and rodents to build nests with materials that are easily ignited by embers. Flames from this type of ignited debris can spread to the structural support members, bypassing the protection offered by a Class A rated roof covering. Plugging these openings between the roof covering and the roof deck, is commonly called "bird stopping". Regularly inspect and maintain these areas.

DEBRIS ACCUMULATION – ROOF AND GUTTERS

Wind-blown debris (including leaves and pine needles from nearby and overhanging trees) will accumulate on roofs and in gutters. Dry debris can be ignited by wind-blown embers. These flames can extend to the edge of the roof and adjacent siding. Even with Class A fire-rated roof coverings, vertical surfaces next to the roof edge will be exposed to flames from the ignited debris. Regularly remove vegetative debris from your roof and gutters.

ATTICS, CRAWLSPACES, SOFFITS AND EAVES

Post-fire research has shown attic vents, roof and gable end vents and under-eave areas are entry points for embers and flames. Reduce the size and number of embers that pass through vents into attic and crawlspaces by covering them with a ⅛-inch metal mesh screen. When wildfires threaten, vents can be covered with ½-inch or thinner plywood, or a thin metal plate. Ensure these are removed when the threat has passed.

REDUCE YOUR ROOF'S VULNERABILITY TO WILDFIRE

1. Roofs should be Class A fire-rated, such as asphalt composition shingles. If you're unsure about your roof's rating, hire a professional roofer to make a determination.
2. Remove debris on the roof and in the gutters at least twice a year, or more often if necessary.
3. Remove tree branches that overhang the roof.
4. Periodically inspect exposed areas under eaves and soffits to ensure construction materials are in good condition.
5. Cover vents, e.g., with noncombustible, corrosion-resistant ⅛-inch metal mesh screens.
6. Inspect and maintain your roof on a regular basis. Replace when necessary.

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