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Fireproof promptly with proper pummeling



Permaculture in Practice

by Nate Downey

Recently deprived of precious privacy, some people have lost serious money on real estate due to the piñon-pine situation in Northern New Mexico. Suddenly startled by a quiet crowd of lifeless "ever-greens" everywhere, their once humble homes or expansive estates now look out onto short-term tinderboxes and long-term potential dust bowls and deep arroyos. More on preventing dust bowls and deep arroyos next month. Today, let's focus on fire and what we can do to protect our homes and land.

When one considers the permacultural design method called, "designing for catastrophe," some of this aforementioned real estate could even become more valuable in the not-too-distant future. To understand this we must first understand

that even healthy piñon forests are dangerous places to build dream homes with any permanence. Ours is a fire-determined landscape, like it or not. Although it is not easy to accept, this is an excellent example of permaculture's principle "the problem is the solution." The beetle "problem" is a "solution" to our dangerous fire situation - especially when it comes to trees near our homes.

You see, first comes the bark beetle (*Ips confusus*), then the piñon dies about a month later. The good news is that once its sap has dried up and most of its needles have blown away (about two years), and once its twigs and smaller branches have fallen down (about four years), nearby structures are extremely safe from fire. It doesn't matter if your trees are currently dessicated or just waiting patiently to be moved forward from the bark beetle's back burner. Compared to homes situated in the midst of piñon forests, homes surrounded by piñons that have been dead for four years will have almost no threat of fire.

Fortunately local Realtor Alan Hoffman has developed plans to

speed up the process of decay, and to make the threat of fire much easier to see. Using a 7' green, metal "tee-post" bought at Empire Builders for \$3.48 plus tax, Hoffman first removes the "fins" of the post. Then he grinds down the bumps that the post comes with "so you don't get blisters," he says.

On a very short video that he lent me recently, Hoffman chooses, as his first victim, a 10-foot piñon that died last summer. The fun starts when, to the tune of "Rock Lobster," Hoffman, at five feet 10 inches tall and weighing in at 194 pounds, accelerates four years of Mother Nature as he pummels the pitiful piñon to smithereens. He even has Santa Fe County Fire Chief Hank Blackwell holding the stopwatch. "A minute, 15," Blackwell says calmly.

To get the full effect, just think "Monty Python and the Holy Grail" meets Mel Gibson in "Braveheart." Kidding aside, this is a very practical technique to reduce fire danger around homes in a way that costs very little money, while it benefits your land. As Blackwell later says, "All of the biomass remains on site," which will control erosion and protect the denuded soil.

Produced by Arthouse Productions (984-9867 x2), the video can be purchased for \$12. I'd say it would be worth the price for anyone who wants a good chuckle, especially if you know Alan or even his brother Lenny, and for anyone who has a few dead piñons around their house and who happens to be confused about the pummeling technique referred to above

As many readers of this magazine know, Hoffman is currently with the Environmental Marketing Group at Town & Ranch Real Estate and has been a forward-thinking voice in the Santa Fe community for decades. Now, as a member of the Education Committee of the Santa Fe Realtors Association, he says his committee has made a motion to launch a campaign to educate the public about "this easy way for people to protect their homes."

Stay tuned.
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