

Be Firewise, Part 1

Firewise on the Farm

The South Dakota Wildland Fire Division (SDWF) realizes that as harvest preparation accelerates farm activities, fire safety details could be hastily overlooked. Please take time now to incorporate the following six steps to keep your farm Firewise; these simple steps can save you a lot of time and money.

1. **Properly prepare machinery** to reduce the chance of a field fire from an overheated bearing (check the manufacturer's recommendations). A spark from an improperly lubricated combine can instantaneously ignite dry plants and field debris.

Check that all fire extinguishers carried on the machinery are fully charged with loose powder inside. If the powder is not loose, remove the extinguisher from its bracket then thump the canister with a rubber hammer until the powder moves when shaken.

Make sure the size of the extinguisher is appropriate for the size of the machinery. You may need larger and/or additional extinguishers. Also make sure you have the correct extinguisher for the type of fire to be extinguished. There are two types of extinguishers, the powder extinguisher for electrical and petroleum based fires and the water extinguisher for vegetative fires. This means that you may need to carry both kinds of extinguishers.

Again, all extinguishers should be easily accessible, fully charged, and the proper size and type for the area.

2. **Keep equipment clean.** Check and remove combustible harvest debris from motors, exhausts, ledges, and brackets several times a day. A portable gas-powered leaf blower is great for blowing debris from the various surfaces of the combine.
3. **Service grain storage and drying equipment.** Storage facilities are like your bank vault! Protect their contents by properly servicing all bearings, belts, motors, and drags. Dryers frequently cause fires, so before drying grain have a qualified service technician perform the necessary maintenance. Also keep grass and all vegetation mowed no higher than four inches around the facilities to discourage a fire from spreading.
4. **Turn off interior lighting in overfilled bins.** A grain fire will start if the grain surrounds the bulb! Turn off the light's breaker to avoid accidentally turning the light on. This also applies to hay storage facilities.
5. **Handle hay properly.** Improper hay storage commonly causes or complicates farm fires. Preventative measures greatly reduce this risk.

Planning proper hay storage is crucial. Store hay away from combustibles such as gasoline, fertilizers, and pesticides, as well as open burning areas like burn barrels, brush piles, and vegetative burning. Arrange round bales in groups of 10 or fewer and place at least 100 feet away from structures. Leave 30 feet of mowed grass, bare ground, or rock between the bale groups, creating a solid fire break.

Many hay fires occur by spontaneous combustion of moist hay, usually within six weeks after baling. Plan to bale hay at its driest stage and do not bale in the morning dew or too soon after a rain.

Check stored hay frequently for hot hay or an internal hay fire. Be aware of a caramel or strong burning odor, a visible vapor or smoke, a strong musty smell, and/or hay that is hot when touched. If any of these occur, call the fire department immediately and do not move the hay. Moving it introduces oxygen to the overheated or smoldering hay, fueling the fire and increasing rate of spread.

6. **When tilling in the fall, till a 30 foot break** around building sites, remote bin sites, and outside storage facilities to minimize fire spread. Again, remove weeds and other combustibles around structures and stored equipment.

If a fire occurs, remain calm, call 911 immediately. Provide clear, concise directions to your location. Many field and bin sites do not have 911 addresses, so be prepared to identify an intersection or landmark to direct responders.

To help control field fires until firefighters arrive, remain calm and act swiftly. Quickly disk a fire break approximately 15 feet wide around the fire. Be cautious when doing this as smoke will starve and stall a motor and will make hazards and bystanders hard to see. To assist with a structural fire, make sure there are no flammable objects nearby and if the circuit panel is safely accessible turn off the building's electricity. If time allows, evacuate any livestock to a distant pasture. Also, if possible spray high-pressure water on any surrounding vegetation or structures, discouraging spreading embers. Do not take risks.

After using any equipment to fight a fire, check air filters, ledges, nooks and crannies for burning debris.

Remember, in a fire emergency, call 911 immediately! Do not wait until all your means of fighting the fire are exhausted. Every minute impacts your losses!

Thank you to the Iowa Department of Natural Resources for providing the Firewise on the Farm information.