



LIVING IN PARADISE COMES WITH A PRICE: BE PREPARED FOR WILDFIRE & OTHER DISASTERS

An Interview with Hugh Daniels, CEM, the City's Emergency Manager

Park City Municipal Corporation: Last winter was very dry, but we also had a wet spring. How will this translate in terms of fire season, which started in the state a few weeks ago?

Hugh Daniels: All of Summit County is a Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI): we are adjacent or within geographic areas that are heavily forested. WUIs are by nature very susceptible to wildfire, but the dry winter further increases the risk because low groundwater levels also reduce the amount of water in plants. Grasses can—in the span of a few days—be either very saturated (after rain) or very dry (after a dry spell). Trees, on the other hand, take months to replenish their water content. Last year's low snowpack means our trees and shrubs have less water than normal, which makes them burn hotter and burn quicker.

The May "monsoons" that occurred a few weeks ago are not uncommon, but if the predictions for a hot summer are borne out, we may experience dry lightning storms: thunderstorms without precipitation. Wildfires are caused primarily by lightning (and secondarily by human carelessness or negligence).

Given the low snowpack and the continuing drought, this year's wildfire season can easily be above normal. Summit County alone may have up to 60 fires during a typical season, although these are generally small and quickly extinguished.

PCMC: So we should all be prepared for a potentially dangerous fire season. What is the single most important thing you can do to be ready for an emergency?

HD: Make a plan, and be ready for any type of emergency. At any time we could have extended blackouts, minor flooding, and the like. It is up to people and businesses to be prepared: nowhere in the city or county's emergency plans does it say we will come and take care of you and give you food and water. Of course, resources will be triggered in a major disaster through the state and federal government, but it won't be for awhile and the response will be limited.

PCMC: When making a plan, where should we start?

HD: You need to be able to take care of yourself, your family, and your pets for a minimum of three days but, more realistically, a week. If the emergency is fire: know what you want to take, and know which route or secondary route you will use to leave. Then go when you're told to go. The second-biggest potential disaster in this area is earthquakes. A magnitude 7.0 temblor in Salt Lake City translates to a magnitude 5.6-5.8 earthquake in Park City, which can still potentially be significant. Earthquakes are different from fires in that they generally cause more widespread destruction. The results will also last longer because crews need to remove debris and bring utilities back on-line. . Additionally, people may not want or will not be able to go back to their homes. Park City will be also most likely be an island: from modeling, we expect to have landslides in Parley's, Provo, Weber, and possibly Echo Canyons. This leaves only U.S. 40 as an access route. If this is the case, our citizens should plan to be on their own for seven-to-ten days.

PCMC: Communication is extremely important during a disaster. Which communication channels should residents and visitors be aware of?

HD: First and foremost, make sure you register your cell phone and email address with Reverse 911 on the city's website. Landlines are automatically registered (unless your home phone is delivered via voice-over IP—VoIP—or cable). Within the next year, we plan to implement a new federal program that can send short emergency text notifications to every cell phone—regardless of number—within a designated cell tower's range, but right now we are still relying on having specific numbers in our database.

In addition to Reverse 911, KPCW, our local radio station, will be a key partner during an emergency. They have their own generator and are an integral part of the city's emergency management plan. Additionally, the city has its own radio station: 1700 AM. And make sure to check the city's website and social media feeds to keep abreast of updates.

PCMC: How else can you protect your home and family from fire?

HD: Your home should have about 30 yards of "defensible space" around it, if possible. This does not mean you need to cut everything down around your house, but you should try make your house an "island" of safety. Simple measures such as cleaning gutters, not storing firewood or propane tanks underneath or next to your house, and cutting back tree branches from eaves and roofs can make a big difference. You should also consider replacing any flammable plants with fire-resistant ones.

PCMC: Is there a service that makes defensible-space recommendations?

HD: Casey Vorwaller, an inspector at the Park City Fire District, offers defensible-space audits of private property. PCFD also has a chipping program to help you dispose of any trees or shrubs that you have cut back for safety.

PCMC: Park City Municipal tries to be a good role model for its citizens. How safe are the city buildings with regard to defensible space?

HD: The city is currently conducting a defensible-space audit of its own properties. We are evaluating all 62 city-owned buildings, even those made of concrete. We want to make sure no vegetation will impact us or our neighbors.. The evaluation team, composed of the city's horticulturist, our deputy fire marshal, a representative from PCFD, and me, will be reporting back to the City Council with our recommendations that come out of the audit.

PCMC: You are a Certified Emergency Manager®. What does this mean?

HD: This certification is bestowed by the International Association of Emergency Managers (www.iaem.org). Currently there are only 1705 CEMs in the world, and only 10 in Utah. I first became certified five years ago.

PCMC: How are you credentialed?

HD: The application process involves sitting for an exam, submitting an essay, completing 200 hours of training, and demonstrating three years of full-time emergency management experience, as well as experience in managing two real disasters or full-scale exercises. Each applicant also needs to complete six of twelve activities outside their job for the industry, such as serving as an officer in the state trade association, winning awards, having served in a leadership role, having completed a research project, or mentoring other emergency managers, to name a few.

PCMC: Amazingly, you also have other duties for the city besides serving as emergency manager. What else are you responsible for?

HD: I oversee the Building Security and Safety Programs for the city as a whole. So I stay busy, but I also have a lot of fun. I've had three careers in my life: I was a paramedic in Pasadena, California, I owned a bed-and-breakfast in Park City, and now I am the city's emergency manager. All three of my careers have been fun, but this is certainly my favorite. When time allows I love to travel internationally and also get in some beach time.

You can learn more about living safely in a Wildland Urban Interface at the following sites:

<http://www.utahfireinfo.gov/>

<http://summitwildfires.com/>

<http://www.weatherwizkids.com/weather-wildfire.htm>

<http://www.firewise.org/>

<http://ffsl.utah.gov/index.php/fire/resources-for-homeowners/homeowner-education>

To learn how to put together an emergency kit for your family, visit the Summit County Family Preparedness page:

http://www.summitcountyhealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/SC_Family_Preparedness_Guide.pdf

To learn about the Park City Fire District's chipping program and defensible-space audits, visit their website: <http://www.pcfid.org/>