

STATE OF COLORADO

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DIVISION OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT
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GOVERNOR PROCLAIMS LIGHTNING SAFETY & WILDFIRE AWARENESS WEEK IN COLORADO

(DENVER) - Governor Bill Ritter has declared June 22 - 28, 2008, Colorado Lightning Safety & Wildfire Awareness Week, noting that the key to understanding the dangers of lightning and wildfire is through education and awareness. The Colorado Division of Emergency Management is teaming with the National Weather Service, Colorado State Forest Service, Division of Fire Safety, and the Rocky Mountain Insurance Information Association to help inform Coloradans about protective actions they can take to reduce the damage these events can cause.

Lightning is the second greatest storm-related killer in the United States and the most dangerous thunderstorm hazard in Colorado. Lightning kills an average of 62 people in the United States each year. In 2007, there were 47 deaths and hundreds of others were injured. That's more than the annual number of people killed by tornadoes or hurricanes. A study in the Colorado area found that one out of every 52 lightning flashes results in an insurance claim. It is estimated that 307,000 lightning claims are filed annually across the United States to the tune of over \$330,000,000.

During the 2002 Colorado fire season, more than 4,500 wildfires burned over 600,000 acres, destroyed 380 homes, and caused the evacuation of more than 80,000 people. It cost \$306 million to fight and recover from the fires. It also was the first time in history that Colorado received a Presidential Disaster Declaration for wildland fires. The Ordway fire in April of this year charred 8,900 acres in Crowley County, took two lives, and damaged or destroyed 24 structures.

Statistics from the National Interagency Fire Center show a total of 3,544 fires in the Rocky Mountain Region in 2007. Of those 1,672 were lightning-caused and 1,872 were human-caused and thus, could have been prevented.

“Many of Colorado’s forests are dry from several years of extreme drought and are at an age and condition that make them susceptible to large wildfires,” according to Colorado State Forester Jeff Jahnke. “Whether they are caused by human activity or lightning, wildfires in these forests can pose extreme risks to people, communities, and natural resources.”

Colorado Division of Emergency Management Director Han Kallam says, “We can’t stop lightning-caused wildland fires, but people can mitigate the impact. We continue to build in the wildland/urban interface. Fire is common in these areas and special precautions are necessary for homeowners and land managers. We can make a difference with public education.”

Two important ways to protect property from the ravages of wildfire are to create defensible space around homes and replace roofs with fire-resistant materials. Coloradans can help protect themselves and their property and reduce the damage and destruction of wildfires by being aware of precautionary measures they can take before and during lightning, severe weather and wildfire events.

“Common sense about lightning safety and fire use in Colorado is an absolute necessity,” says Kallam.

People should also think about mitigation in terms of protecting their pocketbook-in the short and long-term.

"Homeowners need to understand that protecting their property plays a part in keeping affordable insurance," says Carole Walker, Executive Director of the Rocky Mountain Insurance Information Association. "If you live in a high risk wildfire area insurance companies increasingly expect you to share the responsibility for reducing the threat of wildfire damaging or destroying your home."

For a free guide on wildfire mitigation and insurance:

http://rmiia.org/Catastrophes_and_Statistics/Wildfire_and_insurance.html

For information on wildfire preparedness, lightning safety and what Coloradans can do to take responsibility and prepare for disasters, visit the Colorado Division of Emergency Management (CDEM) website at <http://dola.colorado.gov/dem/>; the National Weather Service offices in Colorado at: Boulder - www.weather.gov/denver, Grand Junction - www.weather.gov/grand_junction, Pueblo - www.weather.gov/pueblo, and Goodland, Kansas - www.weather.gov/goodland; the Colorado State Forest Service website at <http://csfs.colostate.edu/>; the Division of Fire Safety at <http://dfs.state.co.us/>; the Rocky Mountain Wildland Fire Information website at <http://www.rockymountainwildlandfire.info/>; and the Colorado Lightning Resource Center - <http://www.crh.noaa.gov/pub/?n=ltg.php>.

Lightning hazard statistics for 2007 may be viewed at <http://www.lightningsafety.noaa.gov/more.htm>.