

Final event in Middle Colorado Watershed Council's Fire and Water Speaker Series, 'Firewise Futures,' comes to Rifle's Ute Theater

Post Independent

As summer approaches, preparing for peak fire season is a priority for many Coloradans who witnessed the effects of the state's fifth largest wildfire, the Lee Fire, near Meeker last year.

The final installment of the Middle Colorado Watershed Council's Fire and Water Speaker Series, "Firewise Futures: Readiness and Resilience in the West," aims to help with exactly that.

Each year, the Fire and Water series, presented by Hotel Colorado, explores how wildfire, water and human systems intertwine in the Colorado River Basin through community events that prioritize story-driven learning.

"Firewise Futures," slated for Thursday, April 30 at Rifle's Ute Theater, is a chance for attendees to learn about fire preparedness by touring a fire safety simulator, screening the documentary "Elemental: Reimagine Wildfire" and listening to a panel discussion featuring local experts.

The fire safety simulator is a mobile trailer from the Colorado Division of Fire Prevention and Control. Using a smoke prop, the simulator demonstrates cooking safety and helps visitors learn how to prepare their home, and their family, for a fire. The trailer will be open for tours from noon to 8:30 p.m. on April 30, and local schools are invited to schedule a field trip for guided demonstrations, according to a news release from the Middle Colorado Watershed Council.

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“I have two (kids) and I’m in the fire service, and I realized a decade into their life that I had never talked about fire drills or smoke alarms in the house,” said Kimberly Spuhler, Colorado’s Community Risk Reduction unit chief. “We just assume that we get that education at school, but that doesn’t always translate into home preparedness and home fire safety.”

Event attendees can purchase food from the Hunger Tech food truck from 4 to 8:30 p.m. The feature-length documentary, “Elemental: Reimagine Wildfire,” kicks off the evening program at 6:15 p.m. with an 84-minute exploration of wildfires, community preparedness and the American West’s changing climate. The film highlights the stories of fire survivors, Indigenous people and climate experts and features historic fires in Colorado, Oregon and California.

“(The film) goes into depth about the importance of defensible space to prevent wildfire, or home ignitions during wildfire, but mainly talks about non-combustible building materials and how we can better defend against wildfire destruction of homes with that type of building construction,” said Zach Pigati, chief of Colorado River Fire Rescue’s Wildland Division.

A 30-minute panel discussion and audience question and answer session will begin around 8 p.m. Panelists include Matthew Schiltz, a supervisory forester at the Colorado State Forest Service’s Rifle Field Office, Ken Hutchinson, a Colorado River Fire Rescue Wildland Division lieutenant, Lisa Hughes, a Colorado program specialist with United Policyholders, and Jim Genung, a Colorado River Wildfire Collaborative advisor.

“I think it’s a good opportunity for (the community) to talk to their local fire department...and get the perspective of what we’re seeing and what we feel our community could benefit from, as well as to get good ideas on how to harden their homes,” Pigati said. “The new code that came out for the state of Colorado only affects new construction, so there’s still a lot of homes on the landscape that don’t meet that.

“This is a good opportunity for homeowners to come in and see if there are retrofit things that they can do, or even just things that they can do around their home, that help harden it,” he added.

Lydia Allen, principal of the Farmers Insurance Lydia Allen Agency in Rifle, will be tabling at the event to

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discuss the Colorado Wildfire Mitigation Discount. The discount was recently introduced by Farmers Insurance and will be available to new homeowners beginning in May.

“People don’t know what they don’t know. It’s just like any other educational thing — when you take the time to go to these informational events, that’s when you really learn what’s out there,” Allen told the Post Independent. “Our community is really awesome about putting on educational events.”

Attendees will also have the chance to win a road safety and first aid kit door prize from her agency, which helped sponsor the Fire and Water Speaker Series.

“You never know what you might know that can help the next person — even just basic information,” Allen said. “It’s a community survival thing. When everyone has a level of awareness, we’re all better off.”

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