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**By Brad Devereaux**

After local officials identified the hill above the Globe Canal in Lovell as a possible serious fire concern, a meeting was held Tuesday at the Lovell Fire Hall to talk about the potential danger and come up with ideas to address the problem.

About 40 people including fire and law enforcement officials, fire planning experts and residents with land near to the hill attended Tuesday's meeting.

Lovell Mayor Bruce Morrison spoke first.

"We haven't called you here to alarm you," Morrison said. "We met last week with the fire department and the county and we have some concerns. If a fire went through the canal area, we would have a real problem."

Firewise Coordinator Chris Weydeveld talked to the group about the process of surveying the area and making a plan to decrease fire danger. He said congress came up with the firewise program years ago to be proactive in preventing fires. If areas are made less of a fire hazard by reducing the amount of available fuel, fires will be less intense and easier to fight when they do occur, saving money on firefighting over the long term, Weydeveld said.

The hill above the Globe Canal is on the top of the county's priority list, he said.

"If there are high temperatures, high winds and low humidity, it could be a problem," Weydeveld said.

Fire Chief Jim Minchow talked about the condition of the hill and showed pictures of overgrowth, brush and other fuels piled high on the hill that made it next to impossible to travel through. Tall weeds, downed trees, palletes and vines on the hill would provide a way for a fire to spread quickly and climb to the top of the many trees on the hill, he said. With the entire hill engulfed, flames could reach heights of up to 120 feet, he said.

He said the fire department has plans for what to do if the hill were to catch on fire, but noted it would be a tough battle. He said trucks would spray water over houses on the top of the hill to protect the structures, while firefighters fought the fire from below. Fire always travels uphill, Minchow said, so it would be safer to fight from below, but it would be tough to stop the fire from moving uphill once it got going.

"If we had a fire now in some locations, we would probably lose some houses," Minchow said. He noted that the Lovell Department has mutual aid agreements with several nearby departments, but in the right conditions, the fire could spread and grow too quickly for them to arrive and control the flames.

It would be tricky for the Town of Lovell to come in and clean up the hill because it is private property. Leaving it to the homeowners isn't a good option either, Minchow said, because some aren't physically able to do the work required on the steep hill. Many residents at the meeting commented that they would not know where to start with the cleanup.

The best option, Minchow said, is for the town and landowners to work together to come up with a solution to the problem.

Some suggestions brought up by residents included building bridges over the canal to improve accessibility to the bottom of the hill, using goats or other livestock to eat some of the fuels, pulling out dead wood and selling it as firewood or establishing a system where wood would be shredded and sold by the town as compost or mulch.

Sheriff Ken Blackburn presented the idea of using a group of non high-risk prisoners to clean up the hillside under the supervision of armed detention personnel. He said it would only be possible if the prisoners were working for a non-profit organization. Prisoners have been used in the past to clean up and rebuild property within the county including the fairgrounds in Basin, Blackburn said.

In response to an idea about controlled burns to eliminate fuels, Assistant District Forester Brian Russell said there would be too much heavy smoke produced that would drift all over town, whether it was windy or not, and grass would grow back thicker than before the burn. He said the burn could allow invasive plants to move into the area and establish themselves on the hill.

“I think burning is not a possibility,” Minchow agreed.

Many said Globe Canal Board members should be contacted and should take care of the tall grasses on the right of way of the canal. Minchow said Globe Canal Board members were invited but none of them attended Tuesdays meeting, adding “we will be talking with them.”

Minchow suggested starting a hillside alliance made up of property owners that would work on the issues together and with the town. He said a group would have a chance to apply for grants to help fund the cleanup.

In the coming weeks, Weydeveld will be surveying property on the hill and making recommendations for what needs to be removed. Weydeveld said he would likely recommend the removal and/or thinning of elm trees, but some must remain to keep the hill from sliding. He said he would compile his findings into a report to present at the next meeting to be held in Lovell in the coming weeks.

Before the next meeting about the issue is held, Minchow asked property owners to clean their own property some, talk to neighbors and get them involved and work on forming an organized group.

Minchow and Weydeveld said they were happy with the large turnout of landowners and town officials.