EXTERIOR SPRINKLER SYSTEMS

Are exterior sprinkler systems an option for protecting a home during a wildfire, after residents have evacuated the property?

Functionality and Installation
The function of an exterior sprinkler system is to minimize the opportunity for ignition by wetting the home and surrounding property. Sprinkler systems should be able to protect a home against the three basic wildfire exposures: wind-blown embers, radiant heat and direct flame contact.

Sprinklers systems can be mounted in one or more locations, including:

• The roof (Photo 1).
• Under the eave at the edge of the roof.
• On the property, in which case the sprinklers are directed at the home from multiple locations surrounding it.

Ember ignition of combustibles located on or near the home can result in a radiant and/or flame contact exposure (Photo 2). Water should reach all vulnerable areas for the system to have maximum effect both on and near the home (Photo 3).

Potential Issues
Post-fire assessments have shown exterior sprinkler systems can be effective in helping a home survive a wildfire, but potential issues exist with their use. These issues include:

• The water supply should be adequate to deliver water, when needed, for the time embers could threaten a home. This period could be up to 8 hours.
  • Check with your local fire department if your sprinkler system uses water from a municipal supply; they may have suggestions to help minimize water consumption.
• The effectiveness of a sprinkler system is questionable when a neighboring home is burning, since this would result in an extended radiant heat and/or contact exposure to the home.
• These systems can be activated manually or by an automated device, such as a sensor that detects heat or flame, or by an SMS-enabled cell phone. The ability of these systems to activate based strictly on an ember exposure has not been determined. Since wind-blown embers can be transported for up to a mile from the flame front of a wildfire, this may be a limitation.
• The most threatening wildfires occur during high-wind events and the homeowner should consider how the distribution/transport of water droplets may be influenced by elevated wind speeds.

Recommendations
Given the potential issues regarding performance, it’s recommended that use be a supplement to, and not a replacement for, already proven mitigation strategies, such as the reduction of potential fuels throughout the home ignition zones, along with removal of roof and gutter debris, and use of noncombustible and fire/ember-ignition resistant building materials and installation design details.