

Preparing Your Home for the Eventuality of Wildfire

“Hardening” your home and creating “defensible space” are essential to improve your home’s chance of surviving a wildfire. Recent research shows that eliminating ignitable fuels from the house itself and the first five feet surrounding it are critical for reducing the probability of home ignition.

The vast majority of homes burned in wildfires ignite from windblown embers landing in a “receptive fuelbed,” or vulnerable spot(s), not from a wall of flames. Proper defensible space (managing the vegetation and other fuels surrounding the structures) will preclude the likelihood of a wall of flame reaching the house, which

allows firefighters the option to evaluate defending the home. It will also allow them to stick with the defense longer if they feel threatened and consider evacuating themselves.

Creating and maintaining defensible space around your home can dramatically increase your home’s chance of surviving a wildfire and improves the safety of firefighters defending your property. One hundred feet of defensible space is required by law. Defensible space, in conjunction with home hardening, is your property’s front-line defense against wildfire!

Defensible Space Basics

You will learn how to create your defensible space in the following pages. Some of the basics to keep in mind include:

- ✓ Keep your gutters and roofs clean of all leaves and needles.
- ✓ Focus on what is immediately around your home. Surround your home and deck with a 5-foot zone that will not support ignition from wind-blown embers. This zone can include noncombustible materials such as rock mulch, stone pavers, cement, bare earth, gravel, or sand. Low-combustibility materials can work, such as an irrigated and maintained lawn (less than 5 inches in height), or irrigated, non-woody herbaceous plants under 5 inches in height. Leaves, needles, or other vegetation that falls in this 5-foot zone must be removed during fire season.
- ✓ Keep all flammable material (e.g. firewood or propane tanks) at least 30 feet from homes or structures. During a wildfire event, also move anything else that can burn—such as patio furniture—beyond this zone.
- ✓ For landscaping within 5 to 30 feet of your home, consider the combustibility of your plant choices. While no plant is immune to fire, certain plants are less flammable. Choose and maintain plants that have:
 - Leaves that are moist and supple.
 - Little dead wood, and tend not to accumulate dry, dead material within the plant.
- ✓ Within 100 feet be sure to maintain clearance between vegetation branches and prune each individual plant. Clearance does not mean dirt or gravel—it’s about flammability—so remove things that are easily ignitable from this area. If you live on a hill, you might extend this up to 200 feet, depending upon the steepness of the slope, and the presence of surrounding fuel.
- ✓ In order to reduce the intensity and rate of spread of an approaching wildfire, reduce the overall volume of fuel, and modify their structure (by focusing removal on the smaller, kindling-like fuels) and arrangement (by breaking up their continuity both horizontally and vertically).
- ✓ Remember the other species that share the land. Leave a vegetation buffer around streams and other sensitive areas.

Know the Law for Defensible Space and Protecting Your Home

CAL FIRE defines defensible space as: “...the buffer you create between a building on your property and the grass, trees, shrubs, or any wildland area that surrounds it. This space is needed to slow or stop the spread of wildfire and it protects your home from catching fire—either from direct flame contact or radiant heat. Defensible space is also important for the protection of firefighters defending your home.”

California is divided into areas where local, federal, or the State of California (via CAL FIRE) has primary financial responsibility for the prevention and suppression of wildland fires. If you live in a “State Responsibility Area” (SRA) there are important requirements to protect yourself and your property from wildfire.

Defensible Space: California law (Public Resources Code 4291) requires that property owners control and maintain vegetation around their buildings to 100 feet (or the property line if less than 100 feet). Reducing the combustible live and dead vegetation in this zone will help slow the progress of an approaching wildfire and provide a safe place for firefighters to defend your home. It also helps to keep a fire that starts on your property from

spreading to your neighbors. To achieve this reduced-fuel zone, start by managing the fuels closest to your home and work outward toward the 100-foot zone (or further on steep slopes) or the property line.

Building Codes: If you live in an SRA-designated area classified as moderate, high, or very high fire severity, there are building codes specifically designed for building homes to resist wildfire. These codes are informed by recent wildfires and published by the Office of the State Fire Marshal. The codes are designed to help homeowners build homes to resist both embers and flames. The codes give specific guidance about construction materials and installation techniques for roofs, ventilation, windows, decking, and other important components of a wildfire-resistant home.

Make sure to check with your local fire station and building department about laws in your area, as many local jurisdictions may have more stringent requirements.

Want to know more? Visit:

osfm.fire.ca.gov/codedevelopment/wildfireprotection and PreventWildfireCA.org

Fuels Management Should Protect Water and Wildlife

Creating and maintaining defensible space does not mean that you need to clearcut your property. Rather, your goal is to remove the most flammable materials and create islands of vegetation for shade and other values. Balance your fire-safety actions with general ecosystem health.

Don't disturb the ground around streams or you could cause erosion that will harm fish. If you live near a stream, stay at least 100 feet away from it—or outside of the streamside management area—in your clearing activities, unless you are working directly with a resource professional like a Registered Professional Forester. It's okay to remove some dead vegetation in a stream area (like pruning in your garden). Don't take out live vegetation—especially trees—near streams or rivers. Always maintain a shaded canopy for fish. Finally, many species of wildlife—such as bear, fox, bobcat, songbirds, and others—use streams as corridors to move from one area to another. Leave them some cover to be able to do this without disturbing you, and vice versa.

If you believe that more intensive treatment is necessary near a stream, contact your Planning or Building Department to determine if a special permit is required for work within a streamside management area:

Del Norte County:

707-464-7254

Co.Del-Norte.CA.US/Departments/Community-Development-Department/Planning-Division

Humboldt County:

707-445-7245

HumboldtGov.org/156/Planning-Building

Trinity County:

530-623-1351

TrinityCounty.org/Planning