

## **From Where I Stand**

### **Creating & Maintaining Defensible Space**

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California Wildfire Awareness Week begins May 6, 2007. This year the theme is, " Why 100 feet?..... Because defensible space is YOUR responsibility. Every year Plumas County experiences a number of small and large fires. Many of our communities have been threatened in the past. Nationwide, the loss of homes to wildfire continues to escalate. Homes have already been threatened this winter in Plumas County. Just across our state border, in Reno, NV; homes have already been destroyed by wildfire. But it doesn't have to be that way. Homes with defensible space can and do survive wildfires.

Research from southern California reveals that homes with wood shake roofs and a lack of defensible space are the leading causes for structure loss. In the "Bel-Air" fire of 1961, homes with a nonflammable roof and 30-60 feet of defensible space had a 95 percent survival rate. This fire was the basis for a California state law requiring 30 feet of Defensible Space around structures. Following the 1990 Santa Barbara "Paint" Fire, where over 800 structures were threatened and 488 lost, a post-fire analysis identified three factors as being most significant in structure survival. The study found that structures with non-flammable roofs and flammable vegetation cleared beyond 30 feet increased survival chances to 90 percent. When someone was present to defend that fire safe structure, survival increased to 99 percent

Southern California wildfires destroyed 3,600 structures in 2003. As a result of those losses, Governor Schwarzenegger established a commission to recommend mitigation measures to prevent such loss in the future. Subsequently, on September 23, 2004 the Governor signed into law Senate Bill 1369, increasing Defensible Space from 30 to at least 100 feet. In January of 2008, additional new fire safe building regulations will become effective.

Homes don't just burn from the radiant heat when forest fuels or adjacent structures are burning. They also burn because of spotting from match like embers or firebrands. These embers originate from trees and bushes that torch out, when they are consumed by flames. Burning needles, branches, and leaves travel in the smoke column for a few feet or up to a mile in front of the main fire. These embers land on and around homes and ignite new fires. They can be blown into attic openings and under houses or decks, into needles on roofs, onto lawn furniture and woodpiles, or on the landscaping around the home. These small embers then ignite readily available fuel which can then spread to a structure. Critical to protecting homes is making sure embers can't get into or under the structure as well as eliminating paths for fire spread to the structure.

We know how and why homes burn in wildfires. For the most part, their loss is preventable, with a little effort from the homeowner. That effort requires creating 100 feet of defensible space around your home or to the property line, whichever is less. The 100 feet of defensible space is divided into two zones. The "Lean, Clean, and Green Zone" and the "Reduced Fuel Zone".

The “Lean, Clean, and Green Zone” is the first 30 feet nearest the structure, where all combustible litter, debris and dead or dying vegetation must be removed. Low vegetation in this zone, such as lawn or ground cover, needs to be kept healthy, well watered and trimmed short. There should be no pathways for fire to get to the structure.

Next is the “Reduced Fuel Zone” that extends from 30-100 feet from the structure, the guidelines are more tolerant of scattered natural surface fuels. The guidelines allow for retaining grasses up to 4 inches, and a two or three inch layer of litter consisting of loose twigs, cones needles or leaves. Small trees, brush, and even green tree branches to the ground, (called “fuel ladders”) need to be selectively eliminated. Those ladder fuels which are growing under larger trees create vertical fuel paths for crown fires. Remaining trees and brush need to be well spaced and/or well pruned. Occasional downed logs and snags may be retained if clearance is created around them. they are cleared around. This zone should allow for a fire to only burn surface fuels and not become a crown fire.

For complete information on creating defensible space: you can view California’s “*General Guidelines for Creating Defensible Space*” on the Plumas County Fire Safe Council’s website at [www.plumasfiresafe.org](http://www.plumasfiresafe.org) , scroll down to Firewise and click on the tab for defensible space, which includes the Guidelines. The website also provides useful information and links for landscaping, fire and weather information, and council activities. Your local fire department, the US Forest Service, and CDF all stand ready to help by answering questions and some may provide on-site evaluations of your property.

All federal, state and local fire departments recognize that proper clearance dramatically increases the chance of your house surviving a wildfire and provides for firefighter safety. Plumas County residents need to appreciate that when fast moving wildfire burns toward a community that there aren’t enough fire engines available to defend all of the homes. In much of Plumas County, you can expect that only 10-15 fire engines may arrive within the first hour of a wildfire, when in fact more may be needed. Will there be enough for each house? Will they come to your home? Will it be safe enough for them?

To all of you who have created your defensible space and maintain it annually, the Plumas County Fire Safe Council and local, state & federal firefighters would like to say THANKS!.

For those of you who haven’t created your defensible space, please think about this. Complying with the new regulations means more than just following the law. It can also help protect both your home and loved ones. In Plumas County, it is most likely that, the first fire resources to arrive will be volunteer firefighters, your friends, neighbors, or family members. Will you have provided them a safe environment with which to protect your home?

Now, please also ask yourself.

- If you haven’t created your defensible space, should firefighters be placed at increased risk to save your home?

- If you haven't cared enough, long before a fire is threatening, to take proven actions to help protect your home and comply with the law, why should firefighters protect it?
- If a firefighter is injured while providing structure protection to your home without defensible space, are you liable?
- If you haven't complied with the defensible space law, why should taxpayers pay for fire agencies to protect your home?
- If you haven't complied with the law, by creating your defensible space, will your insurance cover your losses?

Defensible space is the law, it saves homes and lives. Do you have yours?