

Defensible space can be the difference between a home still standing and one reduced to ash



Defensible space can help save a house from fire.

By Kathryn Reed

What would happen if an ember the size of a softball were to land on your property? On your roof? Is there anything that would catch fire?

That is the visual Leona Allen with Lake Valley Fire Protection District likes people to think about.

If that burning ball can ignite a larger fire, then better defensible space is needed.

“Our fire season is predicted to be heavy to extreme. That is something we want people to be prepared for. We want people to do defensible space,” Eric Guevin, Tahoe Douglas Fire Protection District fire marshal, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

While defensible space has become a common phrase in the last handful of years, laws about defensible space have been on the

books for decades.

But it really came into play after the 2003 Southern California fires. After they were extinguished, a Blue Ribbon Commission was convened. Out of that came recommendations for suppression, response, building standards and defensible space.

“With expanding communities, we now have structures embedded in natural fuels. People who live there see it as nature, not fuels. Fire sees a structure as something to burn,” South Lake Tahoe Fire Chief Bruce Martin told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Many people moved to Tahoe to be in the mountains, which means being around trees. But too many trees too close together, with canopies not adequately spaced can be a bad thing.

Years of suppressing fire also means some forests are now more combustible. That is a reason thinning or fuels reduction projects are so common.

But individuals have a responsibility to be fire aware, too. From zero to 5 feet is supposed to be a noncombustible area around a structure. This means rock or succulent plants that hold lots of moisture. The 5- to 30-foot area is supposed to be lean, clean and green. Trees should be 10 feet apart; same with crowns. From 30 feet to 100 feet or the property line is where vegetation can start transitioning back to the wild.

A rake, loppers and gloves can improve the defensible space area of many houses, Guevin said. He added that juniper is “like a gas can” and it’s best to remove it.

“They say your defensible space is as good as your neighbors’, so you have to look at it from a community aspect,” Guevin said. “The way codes are written now there is more ability to enforce people to take action. They can be liable for fires that start on their property and spread to another. It’s called fire trespass.”

Adequate water supply, ease of access to and from a house, proper signs on streets, addresses clearly marked are all part of being fire ready. So is having an evacuation plan.

Gareth Harris, fire chief at Lake Valley, said, "Every home in the Angora area had been contacted three times. Of the homes that did defensible space, 75 percent survived the Angora Fire. Statistically, that is saying a lot considering the devastation of homes lost there."

Six years ago this month, 254 houses on the South Shore – in Harris' jurisdiction – were swallowed by fire. This, after someone who has never been caught left an illegal campfire without its being fully extinguished.

Fuel, weather and topography are the key factors in how a wildland fire will spread.

"Because a fire is a force of nature we can't stop it. We can try to protect homes in front of it and work the edges. We have to wait for the weather to moderate to put (the fire) out," Martin said.

He believes if a couple million dollars had been put into fuel breaks or treatments that the \$150 million in property loss from Angora would not have been so high.

In 2007 the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency was promoting wood chips and pine needles as tools to cut down on erosion. Property owners could only cut down trees with a diameter of 6 inches or less. Policies have changed and TRPA even has a forester on staff now. Now trees 14 inches or less in diameter may be taken down without a permit; and firefighters can mark trees for defensible space reasons.

"Reducing the threat of catastrophic wildfire is a top priority for TRPA and we encourage defensible space and fire resistant landscaping practices. Our stance on pine needles is clear: on areas of bare soil, rake them in the spring and let

them fall in the fall. Keep pine needles and flammable vegetation away from structures and follow fire guidelines to clear your roof of pine needles regularly," Jeff Cowen with TRPA told *Lake Tahoe News*.

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Note:

- Living with Fire is a website that has more information about defensible space.
- This article is about an individual defensible space inspection.