

Homes, Forests, and Fire:

It Doesn't Just Happen in California

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Fire in the southern forest is a natural occurrence, but when you add in the growing human population . . . the question of, “What should I do if my property is threatened by a wildfire?” becomes more relevant by asking yourself, “What can I do to lessen the damage *when* my property is threatened by a wildfire?” The best solution is to become “Firewise” by learning and implementing practices that reduce, not eliminate, the possible catastrophic effects of a wildfire near your home and property. During the summer months, television news stories about western fires are plentiful. As we have seen earlier this year with the Bayou La Batre fires, huge fires can and do occur in Alabama as well. Fortunately, most wildfires are controlled quickly before they escalate into the lead news story on the local television station. However, during drought conditions and with stretched firefighting resources, this may not always be true.

One of the best wildfire prevention tools is the use of fire itself through prescribed burning and the establishment of permanent, maintained firebreaks. If pre-

scribed burning is a viable option, use it. Often in the wildland-urban interface, prescribed burning is not an available tool. Therefore, other measures must be utilized to obtain the similar effects of removing the fuel component of fire.

On large wildfires there are sometimes not enough firefighters available to protect all the homes in a heavily populated area. Triage may be used: those homes having a higher chance of surviving the fire and that can be safely protected will have the manpower allocated to their defense. You need to do your part by proper planning and following these guidelines.

Creating a defensible space is one step in the “Firewise” direction. Defensible space is the area between a house and an oncoming wildfire where the vegetation has been modified to reduce the wildfire threat and provide an opportunity for firefighters to effectively defend the house. Vegetation can be modified by decreasing the amount, height, arrangement, and flammability. First, determine the size of defensible space needed. Slope and vegetation type are the main factors. With gently sloping terrain and

low grass, 30 feet of open space may be adequate. As the slope and height of vegetation increases, the area of defensible space should increase up to 100-200 feet.

Fuel breaks are important components within the defensible space. They can be open, well-maintained lawns, driveways, paths, parking areas, and other areas that break up the fuel availability. Water features such as streams, ponds, and pools are also effective. Borders, fences, walkways, and mulches using rock or concrete can also be incorporated into the landscape.

The second step of creating defensible space is to remove and reduce dead vegetation. All dead trees, shrubs, branches, dried and cured weeds, or wildflowers should be removed from the defensible space on a regular basis. Also, limit the amount of ground litter such as pine needles, leaves, and mulch to 2 to 3 inches in depth. Do not store firewood, gas bottles, or other combustibles within the defensible space. These should be located outside the home’s defensible space and on the uphill side of the house. Clean all debris from roof tops, gutters, and

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awnings on a routine schedule at least once a year. Flying embers from wild-fire account for the majority of house fires with the roof being the most vulnerable. Remove any branches or limbs within 15 feet of the chimney and powerlines.

Separation and arrangement are the next steps. Provide space between plants and tree canopies. At least 10 feet of separation between tree canopies may be adequate on gentle slopes, and up to 30 feet separation on 40% slopes and greater. Separation distance is measured between tree canopies, not tree trunks. When planning and planting both trees and shrubs, remember the size at maturity of the species being planted. Remove “ladder” fuels that will allow the flame to climb from the ground level through the shrub layer into the larger tree crowns. In this defensible space, plant only species that are less flammable, drought resistant, and low growing. Plants, shrubs, and trees of shorter height with open branching habits should be used closer to the house. A list of southern plants can be found at www.ext.vt.edu/pubs/turf/430-300/lists.html.

To summarize all these steps, make the defensible space “lean, clean, and green.” Within a minimum of 30 feet from your house, limit (lean) the amount of flammable vegetation. Do not allow dead



Photo by Charles Squires

The photo below and this aerial view of scorched forestland, both taken during the Bayou LaBatre fire of April 2007, demonstrate just how close the flames came to a number of homes built in the wildland urban interface.

vegetation and other flammable debris to accumulate (clean). Maintain healthy (green) plants during the fire season.

Other considerations include access to your home of firefighting equipment; roads need to be wide enough for two-way traffic, giving adequate clearance for large vehicles. Also, water availability for suppression efforts is crucial, and have your address posted and readable on the roadside.

Lastly, maintain the defensible space. Regularly inspect the property looking for compliance with the steps listed above. Take action to correct problems as they occur. Implementing these practices should provide some peace of mind during the fire season.

If a wildfire threatens your home, you need to have an evacuation plan in place for your family and pets. Listen to the radio and television for details. Park your vehicles pointed toward the exit and loaded with needed clothing, medicines, important papers, and supplies. Also, shut off gas at the tank or meter; turn off all pilot lights; then close all windows, doors, garage entrances, and vents.

If you stay to aid in protecting your home, wear only cotton or wool clothing with long sleeve shirts, long trousers, and boots. Gloves and eye protection should also be worn as a minimum. **BE SAFE.** Do not wait too long to decide to evacuate.

For more information on Firewise, the Alabama Forestry Commission’s brochure, “Living With Fire: A Guide for Protecting Homes from Wildfire” is available at local county offices or on line at www.forestry.alabama.gov and Firewise.org. 



Photo by Mike Kyser