

Opinion: In Defense of Defensible Space

March 21, 2025



When conditions are dry and the wind gets to howling, any ignition source can spark disaster. The firestorms that devastated Los Angeles County early this year were an extreme example. Chaotic conditions bred confusion, speculation polluted the narrative, and many questioned what seemed like minimal suppression efforts as flames engulfed entire towns. Seasoned fire professionals knew better. To coin a phrase: “At 10 mph winds, you are a firefighter. Over 30 mph winds, you are an observer.”

While Los Angeles may seem far away, Del Norte County is no stranger to wind-driven wildfires. The Slater, Smith River Complex, Klondike, Chetco Bar, and Flat fires all burned with extreme intensity, spreading embers ahead of the fire front. In these conditions, firefighters are quickly overwhelmed, aerial resources are grounded, and suppression efforts become impossible until the wind subsides.

The hard truth? In a wind-driven wildfire, there is only so much firefighters can do.

Firefighters do everything they can to protect homes, but they can’t always save every structure—especially those surrounded by thick vegetation. Defensible space is your first and best defense, protecting your home from embers, reducing fire intensity, and creating safer conditions for firefighters.

Most importantly, in California, defensible space isn’t just a recommendation—it’s the law. Under Public Resources Code 4291, property owners in wildfire-prone areas must maintain at least 100 feet of defensible

space around structures. A home without it isn't just a risk to you—it endangers your neighbors and the entire community. Wildfire doesn't respect property lines, and we are only as strong as our weakest link.

Creating Defensible Space

Fire professionals recommend breaking your property into three zones:

Zone 0 (0–5 feet): The Ember-Resistant Zone

Keep this area completely free of anything that can catch fire. Use gravel or pavers instead of wood chips. Regularly clean gutters, roofs, and decks, removing dry leaves and debris. Store firewood, propane tanks, and other combustibles well outside this zone. Even small items, like a dry welcome mat or patio furniture cushion, can ignite from embers and set your home on fire.

Zone 1 (5–30 feet): The Lean, Clean, and Green Zone

Space trees and shrubs apart to prevent fire from spreading. Remove dead plants and cut back dry grasses. Keep tree branches trimmed at least 10 feet from your home and chimney. Store firewood away from structures and clear all brush, wood piles, and flammable materials from under decks, porches, and eaves.

Zone 2 (30–100+ feet): The Reduced Fuel Zone

Thin trees and shrubs to prevent fire from climbing into the canopy. Mow grasses regularly and remove excess branches, fallen leaves, and pine needles. Create horizontal and vertical spacing between plants to slow fire spread. This zone provides critical space for firefighters and helps stop a wildfire before it reaches your home.

How the Del Norte Fire Safe Council Can Help

The Del Norte Fire Safe Council (DNFSC) was formed to provide Del Norte County residents with the knowledge and resources to adapt to our current fire regime. We provide:

Free Home Risk Assessments – Learn how to reduce wildfire risk on your property.

Property Consultations – Get expert guidance on defensible space and fire preparedness.

Prescribed Fire Community Workshops – Learn how to use controlled burns safely to reduce hazardous fuels. Two workshops are coming up in the South Fork Smith River watershed March 4-6 and April 25-27.

However, our federal funding has been frozen since January, limiting our ability to provide direct defensible space and fuel reduction services at this time. Despite this challenge, we remain committed to educating and assisting residents in wildfire preparedness.

As fire season approaches, we urge you to take action now. Start working on your defensible space, support your neighbors, and lend a hand where you can.

Donate to Help Those Who Can't Do It Themselves

Not everyone has the ability to clear their property. In lieu of the funding freeze, DNFSC is now accepting tax-deductible donations to put boots on the ground for those who need assistance. Every dollar goes directly to hiring crews to help property owners who are unable to create defensible space themselves.

By donating, you help protect the entire community. Fire doesn't care about property lines—one unprepared home can put an entire neighborhood at risk.

Take action today. Visit www.delnortefsc.org to schedule a free home assessment, learn more about defensible space, or contribute to this life-saving effort. Together, we can build a fire-adapted Del Norte County.

-Aaron Babcock, County Coordinator, Del Norte Fire Safe Council, Crescent City