



BE READY FOR FIRE SEASON



By Casey Knapp • Photos by Tracey McCormick

Northern Nevada’s firefighters, land managers, and wildfire experts are working towards the prevention of catastrophic fire events. One factor is making this goal nearly impossible – Private properties with poor defensible space.

Every expert interviewed for this series expressed the same concern. Given the rise of destructive multi-factor fire events, local, state, and federal agency work will never be enough. The combination of fire, wind, and drought results in fast-moving fires and far-reaching ember fall. If homeowners want to protect their homes and communities, they need to take action.

“If hundreds of structures are threatened, we have to quickly triage homes for defensibility. If a homeowner hasn’t done fuel mitigation, it may not be safe for firefighters to defend their home.” said Brett Taylor, the WUI Coordinator with Truckee Meadows Fire Protection District. “Work needs to be done ahead of time on private properties to remove fuel, break up continuity, and prepare for worst-case scenarios.”

“Do something,” urges Bill Steward, Owner of Foresight Fire Consulting and the Wildland Fire Coordinator at TMCC. “It doesn’t have to be a major project. Any amount of effort helps. When we all work on approachable tasks, we make an impact in our community.”

While defensible space projects reduce wildfire risk, they can also enhance property value and improve insurability of the home.

Olivia Anderson, a certified wildfire mitigation specialist, permaculture landscape designer, and owner of MO’s Defensible Space emphasizes that “there is a sustainable, aesthetic way to address risk that has a true benefit to homeowners.”

Where should homeowners start? Defensible space is divided into three Zones based on distance from the home: Zone 0, Zone 1, and Zone 2. We’ll include several recommendations for each zone, but urge residents to seek out additional information at livingwithfire.org.

ZONE 0: THE EMBER RESISTANT ZONE (0 - 5 FEET, INCLUDING THE HOME)

This zone is the most important when it comes to protecting your home from wildfire. An ember-hardened home with good Zone 0 defensible space is far more likely to survive encroaching fire.

“Walk around your home and think about a hail of embers,” suggests Steward. “When embers land in flammable materials or blow into the structure, they can ignite the home.”

Zone 0 Actions:

- Regularly clear leaf litter from roof/gutters
- Trim tree limbs/branches away from the roof/siding
- Remove or trim vegetation from against siding or wood fencing
- Remove junipers (these burn hot and cast embers)
- Avoid placing flammable objects against the home
- Avoid storing flammable materials underneath decks
- Rake leaf litter away from the home’s foundation
- Ensure all attic and crawl space vent mesh is 1/8 inch or smaller
- Look into home hardening retrofit options

ZONE 1: THE LEAN, CLEAN, AND GREEN ZONE (5 - 30 FEET)

This zone is typically the most ornamental on a property. Maintenance, pruning, and plant choice allow homeowners to protect their homes while enhancing home value.

“Doing intentional, thoughtful, and aesthetic defensible space work has real value,” suggests Anderson. “Approaching defensible space from a design standpoint, allows you to be more effective in the long term.”

Zone 1 Actions:

- Ensure landscaping is healthy and well maintained
- Create vertical and horizontal space between shrubs, plants and trees



Photos courtesy of MO’s Defensible Space

- Clear grasses and leaf litter from the bases and interior of shrubs
- Cut down invasive weeds (like cheat grass)
- Trim branches at least 10' from rooflines and chimneys
- Replace combustible plants (like juniper and arborvitae) with fire-adapted alternatives
- Keep plants well irrigated during dry months

ZONE 2: THE REDUCED FUELS ZONE (30 - 100+ FEET)

This Zone reduces a fire's pathway to your home. Homeowners should seek to break up vertical and horizontal continuity to reduce the speed and ease with which fire can travel.

"When we think about vertical continuity, it's about eliminating ladder fuel," suggests Anderson. "For horizontal continuity, it's about creating space and breaking up interconnected sections of brush and fuels."

Zone 2 Actions:

- Remove deadfall and dead vegetation
- Trim lower tree limbs
- Reduce ladder fuels by trimming/removing fuels from under larger trees
- Break up continuity between shrubs and bushes

Important Considerations

Keep the following in mind when doing defensible space projects:

- Be mindful about bird/animal nesting season, which primarily occurs in mid-late spring
- Total vegetation removal can invite invasive weeds and make wind, heat and drought factors worse
- Healthy native/drought tolerant plants can help retain wind breaks and soil moisture

In our next article, we'll cover the ways that South Reno communities are coming together to protect our homes and open spaces. In the meantime, what three actions can you take to reduce your wildfire risk?

Courtesy of Living With Fire





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