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**Living Among Trees: Residents urged to be responsible**

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Unfortunately, once again we are graphically reminded of the fragileness of life and property when confronted with raging wildfire. I am saddened by the most recent loss of life which has occurred when firefighters were working to protect a home. In my 30 plus years of wildland fighting fire I have witnessed the loss of both life and property too often. What really bothers me, is that to a large extent, these losses could be significantly lessened if all homeowners in the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI), where forest vegetation and homes come together, redeemed their responsibility and complied with existing law to have and maintain "Defensible Space". Homeowners play a decisive role in not only determining the survivability of their home, but in providing for the safety of those firefighters, professional and volunteer, who come to protect it.

With respect to the five Forest Service firefighters fatally burned protecting a home, and for the 34 homes lost in the Esperanza Fire, I am truly sorry and am not about to speculate as to whether any of the structures did or did not have defensible space. My point here is not to focus on the Esperanza incident and take away from this tragedy caused by an arsonist, but to use it as a catalyst for discussing the issue of "defensible space".

Nationwide, the losses of homes to wildfire continues to escalate. But it doesn't have to be. Homes can and do survive wildfires. According to Jack Cohen, a leading fire researcher with the US Forest Service, "Ignitions of structures depended on the characteristics of a home and its immediate surroundings". His research on home survival includes experiments, fire modeling and case studies.

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-Aire" fire of 1961, homes with a nonflammable roof and 30-60 feet of defensible space had 95% survival. This fire was the reason California enacted the 30 foot defensible space law. Ethan Foote, CDF, wrote his Master's Thesis on structure survival following the 1990 Santa Barbara "Paint" Fire. He identified three factors to be most significant when 488 structures were lost and over 800 threatened. Structures with roofing other than wood shingles, and flammable vegetation cleared beyond 30 feet increased survival chances to 90%. Then, if anyone were present to defend the structure, survival increased to 99%.

On September 23, 2004, Governor Schwarzenegger signed into law Senate Bill 1369, increasing Defensible Space from the former standard of 30 to at least 100 feet. This change was a direct result of the 3,600 structures lost in the 2003 southern California wildfires. Key CDF talking points for the Bill's signing included: "Proper clearance dramatically increases the chance of your house surviving a Wildfire"; and "Proper clearance provides for firefighter safety during a firestorm".

We know that with “defensible space” homes survive and lives are placed at less risk of loss to wildfire. Just like seatbelts are for occupants of vehicles, so is defensible space to homes. Using them makes an enormous difference. We have State laws requiring both nonflammable roofs in new construction and 100 feet of defensible space. So why are we still losing homes and even more tragically lives, to wildfire? Could it be, because all Californians aren’t creating their defensible space?

Unfortunately, in much of Plumas County and California, there is limited enforcement of California's Defensible Space Law, Public Resources Code (PRC) 4291. But really, do we need an enforcement person to make it happen, to make us do what is right? Don't we as property owners have a responsibility to provide for the welfare of our homes and the safety of those whom we call upon to help protect it?

We know how and why homes burn in wildfires. For the most part, their loss is preventable. People should acknowledge that when fast moving wildfires burn towards communities that there aren’t enough fire fighters or engines available to defend them all. In Plumas County, you can expect that only 10-15 fire engines may arrive within the first hour of a wildfire. Will there be enough for each house? Will they come to your home? Will it be safe enough for them?

The Plumas County Fire Safe Council is working in many of our communities to mitigate the threat of wildfires. Our Council has a program to create defensible space for qualifying elderly and disabled citizens and has treated 76 residences in the last 2 years. We have obtained funds to treat 2,500 acres of hazardous fuel conditions in 17 communities. We are working to educate citizens of pre-fire mitigation actions which can protect their homes and our communities from wildfire. Visit our website [www.plumasfiresafe.org](http://www.plumasfiresafe.org) for more information on defensible space, wildfire mitigation, and Council information.

I have personally witnessed too much preventable loss, both human and property, from wildfire. I believe homeowners should not expect firefighters to be placed in harm’s way immediately before a fire arrives, if they have not cared enough, in the days, weeks, months or even years before the fire occurred, to provide those firefighters with a safer environment and prepared their home to survive. Really, why should firefighters be placed at increased risk to save a home, if an owner hasn’t cared enough to take proven actions to help protect it?

Do you have your “Defensible Space”?