Firewise Community Assessments & Action Plans

A practical how-to for creating the NFPA Firewise Risk Assessment and CAL FIRE Three-Year Action Plan

These two forms help your Firewise community see its wildfire risks and choose work that makes a difference. This guide shows you what to do, step by step.

What You Are Completing

Document	Purpose	Timing
Firewise Risk Assessment	A current NFPA template that describes community wildfire risks and recommendations.	Renew every 5 years. CAL FIRE and NFPA approve it.
Three-Year Action Plan	A CAL FIRE template with practical goals for the next three years.	New 2026 submissions cover 2027 to 2029.

The Simple Workflow

1 Look	2 Describe	3 Recommend	4 Plan
Do a windshield survey.	Complete the assessment honestly and broadly.	Turn what you found into clear, big-picture recommendations.	Write annual goals that directly answer those recommendations.

Before You Start

- Use the current NFPA Risk Assessment template and the current CAL FIRE Action Plan template.
- Gather a map, community statistics, topographic maps or satellite imagery. Use a Wildfire-Ready Coalition map when available; they are more useful locally than the NFPA online map.
- Invite the people who can help: your Firewise leader, committee members, a coordinator or mentor, and, if possible, a fire-district representative.
- Set aside time to drive or walk the community, then draft the assessment and action plan together. New communities should prepare both at the same time.
- When renewing a Three-Year Action Plan, use your current five-year Risk Assessment to guide the goals.

Your Best Starting Point: The Windshield Survey

You do not need a property-by-property inventory. Drive or walk through the community and record what you can reasonably observe from public roads and common areas. Look for patterns, not perfection. Do not rely only on homeowner responses; the people who respond may have already done more work than the community as a whole.

- Plants and brush that can burn, including scotch broom and blackberry.
- Steep slopes, sunny sides of hills, drainage areas, and canyons that can change how fire moves.
- Visible home safety features, including roofs, roof edges, vents, siding, decks, and fences.
- Defensible space around homes: Zones 0, 1, and 2.

Evacuation issues: narrow roads, overgrowth, road clearance, turnaround space, likely choke points, alert sign-up, address signs, water access.

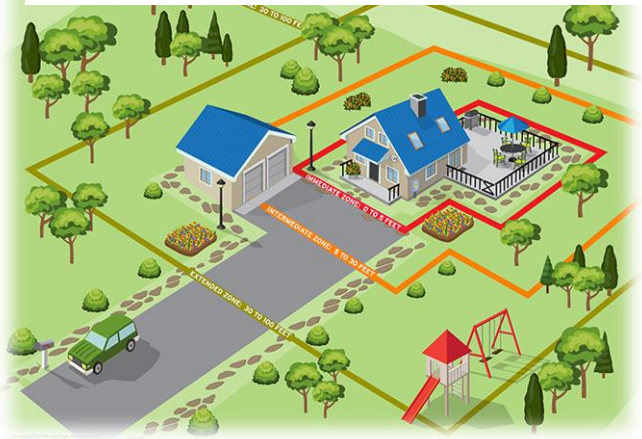
Home Protection Zones: Same Goal Different Names

The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) and CAL FIRE use different names for largely comparable areas around a home. Both begin at the structure and focus on reducing the ways embers, flames, and radiant heat can ignite it.

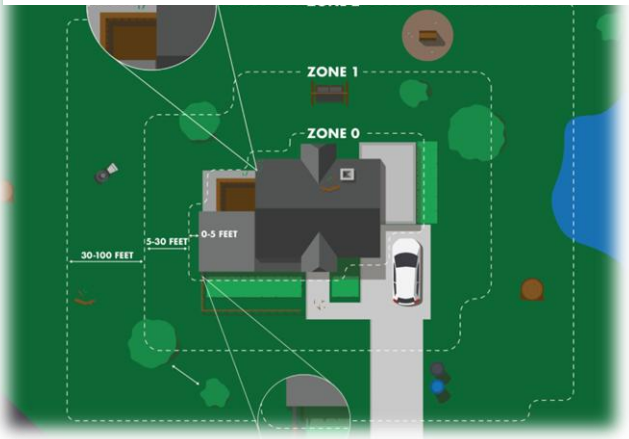
Distance from the structure*	NFPA / Firewise USA Home Ignition Zone	CAL FIRE defensible-space zone	Primary purpose
0 to 5 feet	Immediate Zone	Zone 0 Ember-Resistant Zone	Keep embers from finding something ignitable next to or attached to the home. Use noncombustible surfaces where possible; remove needles, leaves, firewood, combustible mulch, and combustible materials attached to the house.
5 to 30 feet	Intermediate Zone	Zone 1 Lean Clean & Green	Reduce flame contact and prevent fire from climbing from grass to shrubs to tree canopy. Remove dead vegetation; create separation between plants and trees; break up continuous fuel.
30 to 100 feet	Extended Zone	Zone 2 Reduced Fuel Zone	Slow an approaching fire and reduce its intensity. Mow grasses, prune and space vegetation, reduce brush density, and maintain clearance around outbuildings, propane tanks, and woodpiles.

** Measure from the farthest exterior point of the home, including attached decks.*

1 NFPA Defensible Space Illustration



2 CAL FIRE Defensible Space Illustration



Part 1: Complete the Risk Assessment

Complete every section of the current NFPA template. CAL FIRE reviews the assessment for completeness and for a clear connection to the action plan. NFPA Firewise USA also requires a current assessment.

1 Community Profile

Exact counts are rarely available. In Nevada County, use developed parcels as a practical proxy for dwelling units, then estimate residents by multiplying by 2 or a little more. Use 2.5 only where the area is clearly family-heavy. Do not count undeveloped parcels with no structures. The WRCNC can provide information on the number of developed parcels.

2 Local Wildland Fire Characteristics

For all Nevada County communities, regular wind exposure and a history of wildfire apply. Keep the description local: terrain, weather patterns, nearby fuels, and past fire experience all help explain the risk.

3 Site Description: Vegetation and Topography

A simple plant description is enough: dense pine, oak, shrubs, grass, or mixed plants. In areas with smaller parcels, note the presence of dense landscaping. Be more specific about the shape of the land. CAL FIRE pays close attention to steep slopes, south-facing hillsides, drainage areas, and canyons because they can change how fire moves. Note fast-spreading plants that add fuel, such as blackberry, scotch broom, and star thistle. This can help support future grant requests.

4 Home Hardening

The form uses percentage ranges, not exact counts. If you are unsure, choose the lower honest range. You can show improvement later.

Look for	What to know
Roofing	Many asphalt shingle, metal, and tile roofs are Class A fire rated. Look for obvious damage, missing pieces, and built-up leaves or pine needles. For the fire rating or insurance questions, residents should check their roof paperwork, contractor, or insurance company.
Eaves & Soffit Vents	First, look to see whether the eaves are enclosed. Enclosed eaves have a finished underside, so the rafters do not show; they may have soffit vents. Open eaves show the rafters underneath the roof edge.
Walls & Attachments	Look at siding, decks, porches, fences, gates, and other things attached to the home. They can carry fire to the home.

5 Defensible Space

Different programs use different names for the space around a home. NFPA calls it the Home Ignition Zone; CAL FIRE calls it defensible space. Immediate, Intermediate, and Extended Zones line up with Zones 0, 1, and 2. They are all parts of one connected job: reduce the ways embers and flames can reach and ignite the home, starting at the house and working outward

Zone	What to assess	Typical local pattern
NFPA Immediate Zone *(CAL FIRE Zone 0)* **0–5 ft**	The ember-resistant, noncombustible area immediately around the home and attached deck. Look for combustible mulch, plants, firewood, stored items, leaf and needle buildup, and combustible fencing attached to the structure.	Often the most deficient area. Many homes have made progress farther out but still have ignitable material right next to the house.
NFPA Intermediate Zone *(CAL FIRE Zone 1)* **5–30 ft**	Vegetation spacing and fuel management near the home. Look for dead vegetation, shrubs under trees, low branches, connected landscaping, and other ways fire can climb or move toward the structure.	Often shows more progress, but trees and shrubs may still be too closely spaced or connected by ladder fuels.
NFPA Extended Zone *(CAL FIRE Zone 2)* **30–100 ft**	Fuel reduction farther from the home. Look for continuous grass, brush, ladder fuels, dense tree groupings, woodpiles, and unmanaged vegetation that could carry fire toward the structure.	Often still a work in progress. On larger or wooded parcels, this is where a community may find the greatest need for thinning, pruning, brush reduction, and ongoing maintenance.
Beyond the Home Ignition Zone *Property-scale wildfire readiness*	Look beyond 100 feet—especially below homes, on steep slopes, along roads and driveways, in draws, and anywhere vegetation creates a continuous path for fire.	This is **not a CAL FIRE Zone 3** and is not an automatic statewide 200- or 300-foot requirement. It is the larger forest-health and fuel-treatment job: identifying where fire could gain intensity and move toward homes, roads, or evacuation routes.

Important note on slope: CAL FIRE's statewide 100-foot requirement does not automatically become 200 or 300 feet on steep terrain. But for homes above steep, brushy, or heavily forested ground, the vegetation below the home may matter far beyond 100 feet.

Part 2: Write a Strong Summary and Recommendations

This is the most important part of the assessment. The summary should bring together what you observed and point directly to the work in your action plan. A good summary is thorough but not overly detailed.

Organize the Summary and Recommendations Around These Four Categories

Category	What your summary might address
Education & Outreach	Residents need clear, repeated information on local wildfire risk, evacuation readiness, and practical actions. Note what your community already does, such as regular meetings, a mailing list, or a Facebook page.
Home Hardening	Visible needs such as roofs and gutters with debris, open eaves, vulnerable vents, combustible siding, decks, and attachments. Include your best percentage estimates for key items.
Defensible Space & Hazardous Vegetation	Zone 0 gaps, vegetation maintenance, access clearance, fast-spreading plants, and larger fuel concerns. Include what you saw in the windshield survey.
Evacuation Safety	Road conditions, overgrowth, chokepoints, route awareness, signage, address visibility, and neighbor communication.

How to Make the Connection

Start with the Site Description and four action-plan categories (Education and Outreach, Home Hardening, Defensible Space/Hazardous Vegetation, Evacuation Safety). For every recommendation in your assessment, add at least one matching goal to the action plan. If a recommendation does not lead to action, it is only an observation. Each goal should solve a need you saw in the assessment.

Assessment finding	Recommendation	Matching action-plan goal
Many homes have combustible materials in the first 5 feet.	Help residents improve and maintain ember-resistant Zone 0 conditions.	Year 1: Hold a Zone 0 demonstration and distribute a simple checklist. Year 1: Work with residents to remove combustible items in Zone 0, starting with mulch and shrubs or trees next to windows.
Egress roads are narrow and brushy in several areas.	Improve evacuation readiness and maintain access routes.	Year 1: Map priority road segments and organize a roadside-clearance effort. Year 1: Make sure that all residents are signed up for Nevada County Alerts.

Use the Right Defensible-Space Language

Avoid goals that say “increase compliance.” Defensible space is already legally required. CAL FIRE wants the plan to focus on action and maintenance: use phrases such as “improve and maintain defensible space,” “support residents in reducing hazardous vegetation,” or “help residents establish and maintain Zone 0.”

Quick Quality Check Before You Move On

- ☐ Did you cover home hardening, defensible space, hazardous vegetation, evacuation safety, and education/outreach?
- ☐ Did you describe topography clearly enough to explain local fire behavior?
- ☐ Are the percentage ranges honest and defensible? When in doubt, did you choose the lower honest range?
- ☐ Can you point to a future action-plan goal for every major recommendation?

Part 3: Build the Three-Year Action Plan

Use the current CAL FIRE template and its exact category names. Its four categories cover Education and Outreach, Home Hardening, Defensible Space and Hazardous Vegetation or Fuel Reduction, and Evacuation Planning and Wildfire Preparedness. Plan for 3 to 5 goals in each category each year and make the years show a logical progression.

Plan for Progression: Not Three Copies of the Same Year

Year 1 Start & Organize	Year 2 Expand & Deepen	Year 3 Sustain & Improve
Build awareness, map needs, offer demonstrations, and recruit partners.	Reach more residents, deliver projects, and focus on priority gaps.	Maintain the work, revisit gaps, and document results for the next cycle.

Example Goal Progression

Category	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Education	Hold two local readiness events and share seasonal wildfire messages.	Add targeted outreach for areas with lower participation.	Maintain annual events and publish results and next steps.
Home hardening	Offer a home-hardening workshop and checklist.	Coordinate site visits or peer learning focused on vents, eaves, and roofs.	Track reported improvements and update guidance.
Defensible space	Run a Zone 0 campaign and identify hazardous vegetation priorities.	Organize focused cleanup or chipping projects.	Repeat maintenance outreach and address remaining priority areas.
Evacuation	Map evacuation concerns and conduct a readiness exercise.	Improve route information, signage, or communication coordination.	Repeat the exercise and update plans based on lessons learned.

Final Submission Checklist

- ☐ The Risk Assessment uses the current NFPA template and is dated within the five-year window.
- ☐ You completed every required field and check box on both current forms.
- ☐ The assessment includes an honest community profile, wildfire characteristics, vegetation, topography, home hardening, defensible space, and evacuation conditions.
- ☐ The summary recommendations are thorough and organized around the same four categories as the action plan.
- ☐ The action plan has 3 to 5 goals in each category for each year, with clear progression from 2027 through 2029.
- ☐ Goals use action language, especially “improve and maintain” for defensible space.
- ☐ Your Firewise USA portal account is ready, and your community has confirmed its local submission deadline and support contact.
- ☐ You have a simple way to gather and retain photos, volunteer hours, and completed actions for annual renewal.