Defensible Space & Wildfire Ready Land Stewardship

A quick guide to the home protection zones and the bigger job of wildfire-ready land stewardship

California defensible-space requirements around a home are essential, but they are not the whole wildfire-readiness plan. For larger, wooded, or steep properties, the work continues across the land: reducing hazardous fuel continuity, improving forest health, protecting access and evacuation routes, and connecting work with neighbors.

Your home has zones. Your property has a job.

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 products 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	Eliminate 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.*

CAL FIRE Defensible Space
https://www.fire.ca.gov/dspace

NFPA Preparing Homes for Wildfire
https://www.nfpa.org/education-and-research/wildfire/preparing-homes-for-wildfire

California requirement: For properties subject to California defensible-space law, maintain 100 feet of defensible space around structures, or to the property line when it is nearer. Local requirements may be stricter.

Important: The 100-foot requirement is the minimum around a home, not the boundary of good wildfire preparation.

What Comes After 100 Feet: The Whole Property Has a Job

On a two-acre or 100-acre property, wildfire readiness should not end at the defensible-space boundary. The larger property should be managed as a healthier, more fire-resilient landscape. Wildfire mitigation and healthy forests are complimentary. Healthy forests need space and less debris under the mature trees.

Scale	What it protects	What good looks like
Home ignition zone	The home and the people defending it	An ember-resistant first 5 feet; well-spaced, maintained vegetation out to at least 100 feet; a home that is less likely to ignite from embers, flames, or radiant heat.
Property-scale wildfire readiness	The home, access, evacuation routes, neighbors, and the property's ability to receive or slow fire	Hazardous fuel continuity is reduced across the property, especially below homes, on slopes, along roads and driveways, in draws, and wherever grass, brush, or tree canopy creates a continuous path for fire.
Connected-landscape readiness	The wider neighborhood and watershed	Treatments connect across property lines, roads, ridges, evacuation routes, and fuel breaks. Neighbors coordinate work so progress does not stop at a parcel boundary.

The goal is not to clear everything. It is to stop treating every tree as a good tree.
When trees are packed together—with brush, dead material, and low branches beneath them—they become fuel ladders and are susceptible to drought and bark beetles, and are not a healthy forest. A wildfire-ready property has fewer, healthier trees; less continuous brush; open canopy; safer access; and more places where fire can slow down and responders can work safely. Open forests have more water available during droughts.

An overstocked forest is not "natural cover." In a wildfire, it can become a blowtorch.

Slope Changes the Whole Property's Risk

Fire can spread faster and burn more intensely uphill. CAL FIRE addresses this within the required 100 feet by calling for greater spacing between vegetation on steeper slopes.

Slope	Recommended space between shrubs	Recommended space between trees
Less than 20%	2 times the shrub's height	10 feet
20 to 40%	4 times the shrub's height	20 feet
More than 40%	6 times the shrub's height	30 feet

For homes above steep, brushy, or heavily forested ground, the vegetation below the home may matter far beyond 100 feet. Extend property-scale fuel treatment where slope, continuous vegetation, topography, and access conditions create a pathway for fire to build intensity and move toward homes or evacuation routes.

More thoughtful, maintained, connected treatment creates more protection and healthy forests.