

### 3. DEFENSIBLE SPACE

The term “defensible space” was first coined in the 1980 *Fire Safe Guide for Residential Development in California*, and it now provides the cornerstone for the Board of Forestry's fire-safe regulations and CDF's wildland fire prevention planning program.

Defensible space is the area within the perimeter of a parcel, development, neighborhood or community where basic wildland fire prevention practices and measures are implemented, providing the key point of defense from an approaching wildfire, an encroaching wildfire or an escaping structure fire. The perimeter is the area of the parcel or parcels proposed for construction and/or development, excluding the physical structure itself. Properly maintained emergency vehicle access, emergency water reserves, street signs, building identification, and fuel modification should characterize the perimeter area. CDF can provide guidance to local jurisdictions, agencies, professionals and the public in implementing these measures.



**Photograph 3.1.**  
**Lack of Defensible Space**

The design and construction of structures, subdivisions and developments in State Responsibility Areas (SRA), as well as in Local Responsibility Areas (LRA), must provide for defensible space, including built-in wildland fire prevention as prescribed by local jurisdictions and fire agencies. The employment of defensible space is just one step in mitigating wildland fire losses. The primary key of this concept is built-in fire prevention. Each home built in the wildlands must provide some basic level of self-protection, including water, adequate roads, flammable vegetation clearance and proper building identification. Each resident and developer must accept part of the responsibility for incorporating basic perimeter fire prevention measures into the design and construction of wildland structures and developments. This incorporation of defensible space provides a margin of safety for wildland and structural firefighters, provides a point of attack or defense, and increases the survivability of the home or development.



may be the property owner, the developer, a homeowners association, a county service area or even the public jurisdiction. Agreement, bond or inclusion in a maintenance district or service area can secure maintenance.

### **3.2 The State's Responsibility**

The state of California has retained the responsibility for wildland fire prevention as a part of its mission of protecting and enhancing California's natural resources. As homes and communities have been built in the wildlands, the state has taken an active role in proposing mitigation, recommending and assisting in preparing strategic plans and providing effective fire prevention and loss reduction programs and activities. The Fire Safe program was developed in 1963 to address this growing conflict between homes and wildfire. Its goals are to:

- Develop uniform statewide minimum standards for wildland fire prevention.
- Reduce loss and damage to structures and resources.
- Create a safer environment for occupants living in the wildlands who are at risk from wildfires.
- Require self-protection, with less dependence on state and local fire agencies.
- Provide defensible space for firefighters, reducing firefighter risk.
- Reduce the vulnerability of homes and developments to wildfire.
- Support CDF's resource protection mission.

### **3.3 Local Government's Responsibility**

Local government is granted the authority to provide life and property fire protection and to approve local construction and development. Local government therefore has the responsibility to develop prudent and appropriate land use goals, and to implement them through general plan policies, zoning and land use controls. The implementation process is the approval and issuance of permits and maps. To fulfill this role of land use authority, local government must look beyond its interpreted statutory role and accept its responsibility for life, property, safety and natural resources. When growth is allowed to continue in rural areas, local government must ensure that the growth is responsible, limiting risks to an acceptable level. This requires an active response! Demonstration gardens and examples of Fire Safe development and construction must be recognized and shared with those who need to learn. Local government can promote public awareness by demonstrating leadership and appropriate responses to the Urban-Wildland Interface problem.

In response to major wildfire conflagrations in the LRA, the Legislature established fire safe requirements for these areas to balance local fire prevention with that of the SRA. These effort, which are most widely known as the "Bates" and "Brown" bills (AB 337 and 3819), were signed into law in 1992 and 1994 respectively, and are now in effect. As required by the Bates bill, CDF in cooperation with local fire authorities identified Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones (VHFHSZ) in LRA. In accordance with this statute, the original zone identifications were transmitted to local authorities, and the State Fire Marshal (SFM) developed a model ordinance for zone adoption. Local authorities had the option of adopting the ordinance or indicating their fire safe regulations already "met or exceeded" those fire safe standards included in the Bates bill. In accordance with the Brown bill, the SFM drafted another model ordinance in 1996, including more stringent fire safe standards. The history of these laws and the model ordinances are available on the Internet at <http://www.prefire.ucfpl.ucop.edu/izhazard.htm>, as part of the *Wildland Fire Hazard Assessment* publication.

### **3.4 Public Responsibility**

Government today is overburdened and overwhelmed with its responsibilities, especially in the area of fire protection. New fire engines and more firefighters, while necessary to maintain fire protection equivalent with basic growth, are very expensive. Fire engines and firefighters do not solve the whole problem. Eight, 10, 20 or even 100 fire engines cannot protect every home threatened during a wildfire. Thus, the responsibility falls on the homeowner, developer and contractor who create the environment.

Neighborhood and community action are essential. New revenues and tax sources are not easy to find, and new approaches must be found. The residents are the keys to positive action. Groups such as homeowners' associations and Fire Safe Councils (<http://www.firesafecouncil.org>) are local catalysts that can bring the community together with decision-makers to make active progress.

Fire departments must solicit the support of local officials, citizens and advocacy groups to facilitate adoption, implementation and maintenance of fire safe standards. Public education efforts should focus on these groups. Every wildland resident and visitor must understand how to act in a fire safe manner.

### **3.5 Natural Hazard Disclosure**

Since July 1, 1991, each seller of real property in SRA has been required to disclose to any prospective purchaser that the property for sale is in a wildland area that may be subject to wildfire risks and hazards. Each seller shall also disclose that the property must meet the flammable vegetation clearance requirements of Public Resources Code (PRC) 4291. The seller must also disclose to any prospective buyer that it is not the state's responsibility to provide fire protection services to any building or structure located within the wildland unless the state has entered into an agreement with local government to provide structure fire protection.

Effective June 1, 1998 the law requires disclosure by the seller of real property of all areas subject to certain natural hazards including fire hazards. All SRA lands pursuant to PRC 4125 are included on Natural Hazard Disclosure (NHD) maps. Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones (VHFHSZ) in LRA identified pursuant to Government Code Sections 51178 and 51179 are also on these maps. Copies of the maps showing these areas have been provided to each county planning department and to each CDF Ranger Unit. Additional copies are available through the Teale Data Center in Sacramento. More information about NHD is available on the Internet at <http://www.ceres.ca.gov/planning/nhd>.



**Photograph 3.3.**  
**Home within State Responsibility Area**