



## Experts urge homeowners to prepare for fire

Defensible space is encouraged as effective way to avoid home fire disasters

By Julie Brown  
Sierra Sun  
May 16, 2007

When it comes to protecting homes from fires, homeowners should be concerned about the little details rather than the big trees.

That's the message from the Nevada Fire Safe Council, which is working to educate communities on the need to follow state law and clear defensible space to protect homes and businesses.

The council is collaborating with neighborhood fire safe chapters and the North Tahoe Fire Protection District to spur action and streamline defensible space procedures.

### Busting misconceptions

The common image of a wildfire as a fiery avalanche bearing down on a community, engulfing anything it encounters, is actually an unusual scenario, said California Coordinator John Pickett of the Nevada Fire Safe Council.

"We need to change people's mindsets," he said.

Reviewing a video of the Southern California fires of 2003, Pickett pointed out flaming homes amid trees that remained perfectly intact.

"It is obviously not the forest that is burning down these houses," he said.

Large trees are not the fire hazard some may think. On the contrary, large trees are encouraged because they provide shade that prevents the growth of low-lying brush, the real fire threat.

The reality is that 90 percent of homes lost in forest fires are either ignited by burning embers falling on wood-shake roofs, or by nearby concentrations of flammable brush, said Pickett.

When ignited, wood-shake roofs are responsible for top-down fires that firefighters find impossible to extinguish, Pickett said.

Manzanita and other low-lying brush create fuel ladders that, when they catch fire, spread rapidly into the upper branches of trees or into a home's eaves.

The other 10 percent of homes that burn are ignited by the extraordinary heat from neighboring buildings that are on fire, Pickett said.

"If your neighbor's home catches on fire, your home will probably catch on fire," Pickett said. "Think about how much fuel is in a house."

If one home goes up in flames, a disastrous urban fire may be imminent, spreading too fast for containment and overwhelming the fire department.

What's the solution? If a home has a defensible space of 100 feet cleared of brush, chances are it will be protected and lessen the threat to the entire community. The solution is a collaboration to create community-wide support for defensible space.

"The way to protect the community is to protect your individual house and join together with your neighbors to protect their houses," Pickett said.

### Community collaboration

The Nevada Fire Safe Council has 61 neighborhood chapters throughout Nevada and the Tahoe Basin, including chapters in Talmont, Carnelian Bay, Dollar Point and Bunker Road.

Led by neighborhood residents, local chapters provide education to increase collaborative fire awareness.

"It has to be the community that joins together as one, because if we lose a single house then we lose the community anyway," Pickett said.

The chapters encourage second-home owners to participate as well.

Local fire safe chapters are also collaborating with the North Tahoe Fire Protection District to protect their neighborhood.

### Streamlining defensible space

The Nevada Fire Safe Council and the North Tahoe fire district have created a new database management system that tracks the status of an individual home's defensible space, from coordinating home inspection to removing hazardous fuels from the property, facilitating what previously was a tedious procedure.

"One phone call to the Fire Protection District starts a process that ends up with a house with defensible space and the [wood] chip going into the biomass program," Pickett said.

The fire district is still working out the mechanics of the system, but hopes it will be in full swing by June, said district Forest Fuels Manager Stewart McMorrow. The first step is a call to the hotline to schedule a home inspection.

McMorrow will assess properties, marking any trees or ground fuels that need to be removed, and give the homeowner a defensible space inspection report.

The district is currently negotiating with the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency for the authority to issue tree removal permits, McMorrow said.

After the inspection, the homeowner can either clear the defensible space or request a fuels-removal crew through the database to do the work for them.

The process ends when the database notifies a crew to process the cleared brush into wood chips that can be converted into green energy.

“All these elements of our program are about to come together,” said McMorrow.

“We’re here to protect property and protect lives,” he said. “...One thing’s for certain, fire danger is only going to get worse.”

---

[BACK](#) 