

HOMEOWNER RESPONSIBILITIES FOR FIRE HAZARD REDUCTIONS

As part of the continuing *Firewise* effort, Lake Almanor West property owners will be receiving updates on fire hazard reduction matters in the Newsletter. This issue focuses on the requirements of **STATE LAW** as it applies to local homeowners.

Following a series of devastating fires in the southern part of California, a number of changes were made to various statutes dealing with construction and maintenance of homes in areas such as ours. This article will deal with the issue of "Defensible Space", as specified in California Public Resources Code (PRC) Section 4291 and further clarified by CalFire's 2006 "General Guidelines for Creating Defensible Space." These requirements apply to all parcels at Lake Almanor West where a home has been constructed. (The State requirements do not apply to vacant [undeveloped] lots, although local CC&Rs do apply there; this will be a topic for a later Newsletter article.)

PRC 4291 requires that homeowners create and maintain an area of "defensible space" around all structures on the parcel. The area nearest the home needs the greatest attention; this is often called the "Lean, Clean and Green Zone", which starts at the structure and reaches out to a distance of 30 feet. Beyond that is the "Reduced Fuel Zone", which extends to 100 feet from the structure or to the property line, whichever is less.

The area in the zone nearest the house must be kept free of vegetation fire hazards. To quote the CalFire guidelines, *"Maintain a firebreak by removing and clearing away all flammable vegetation and other combustible growth within 30 feet of each building or structure ... Single specimens of trees or other vegetation may be retained provided they are well-spaced, well-pruned, and create a condition that avoids spread of fire to other vegetation or to a building or structure."*

This means that vegetation, including trees, must be separated from the structure and from each other, both horizontally and vertically. PRC 4291 also requires the removal of (a) any vegetation that comes within 10 feet of a chimney or stovepipe, (b) any dead or dying vegetation within 30 feet of or overhanging a building, and (c) any leaves, needles or other vegetative matter accumulating on roofs.

To comply with these requirements, homeowners will want to ensure that there is no combustible vegetation right next to or under any part of their home or deck. Combustible non-vegetation materials such as firewood, lumber, debris, etc. should also be relocated away from the building.

In the "Reduced Fuel Zone" (i.e., 30 to 100 feet from the home), CalFire offers two alternative approaches for forested areas. In situations where tree density is relatively light, homeowners will need to thin as necessary to ensure that there is a minimum horizontal gap of 10 feet between adjacent tree crowns (foliage). To avoid tree crown ignitions from surface fires, all lower limbs must be removed to create a vertical gap of at least 6 feet between the surface and the lowest limb. Shrubs within the zone must be spaced horizontally such that there is a gap between adjacent shrubs that is at least twice the height of the taller shrub (i.e., a 2 foot high shrub would need a 4 foot gap between it and a similar adjacent shrub). If shrubs are beneath trees, the lower tree limbs must be removed to create a vertical gap between the top of the shrub and the lowest tree limb that is at least three times the height of the shrub. Wider gaps are required for lots with significant slope; contact the Fire Chief for specific advice in such situations.

For lots with substantial continuous tree canopy coverage (a common condition at Lake Almanor West), CalFire has a second option for the "Reduced Fuel Zone." If thinning is impractical, the crown contact can be accepted **IF** there are **NO** shrubs or other combustible vegetation beneath the trees. Lower tree limbs must again be removed to achieve a minimum 6 foot vertical gap between the surface and lowest limb (a larger gap would be better).

Please recognize that these are the **MINIMUM** requirements stipulated by **STATE LAW**. They may not be waived or diminished by local ordinances or CC&Rs. The West Almanor Fire Department stands ready to assist homeowners in reviewing conditions on local parcels, but responsibility for compliance rests completely with the property owner. By reducing the hazards on your property, you not only make your fire insurance agent happy, you help make the community a safer place as well.