

FIRE SAFE YARDS - It's not just about the Chips Fire!

Deja Vu, All Over Again

In August and September of 2000 the 55,000 acre Storrie Fire burned to within seven miles of Lake Almanor West. During one of the several major flareups of that fire, hot embers were lifted aloft and carried by strong winds all the way to our neighborhood. Fortunately, no spot fires resulted.

This year we had the Chips Fire, which burned to within 3 miles and threatened us with evacuation. This time we avoided embers because the winds were less strong. But we can't rely on luck to protect us from wildland fire and we could still have flying embers at Lake Almanor West from a debris or structure fire *within* the development.

Ember Ignitions

Embers come in a variety of sizes and configurations, from match-size pieces to small branches, but they all have one thing in common: they can start fires in flammable materials. Sometimes they swirl around like fiery snowflakes, collecting in corners and penetrating openings where they come in contact with structure or other combustible materials. They may look tiny, but they are potentially deadly.

The only real protection against embers is removal of vulnerable materials in their path and blocking their entry into vents. Much of this comes down to ensuring that you are truly in compliance with both CalFire regulations and local CC&Rs.

Structure Protection

It is essential that your home be as ember resistant as possible. A wood shake roof (or siding) is basically an invitation for an ember ignition. Attic and crawl space vents need wire screening with openings no greater than 1/8 inch. (Alternatively, there are new ember resistant vents now available.) Tree limbs need to be pruned back away from the structure and flammable materials on the ground (e.g., needles, bark chips) need to be raked back a minimum of 3 to 5 feet from the structure.

Tall grasses or flammable vegetation must not be allowed right next to or beneath structures. Junipers are especially dangerous near the house because they tend to ignite easily and burn with intense heat.

Woodpiles or stacks of lumber should be located well away from homes or tightly covered with ember-resistant coverings. Open wood piles are basically an ember trap, allowing flying embers to lodge in the interior and begin the ignition process.

Any other flammable items, such as gasoline cans, spare propane bottles and plain old debris, need to be located away from the house.

Trees

Lake Almanor West CC&Rs require that EVERY tree on EVERY lot have its lower limbs removed for fire safety. Little trees (less than 18 feet tall) need the lower 1/3 of the limbs removed, while taller trees need a minimum of 6 feet of clearance between the lowest tree branch and the surface. (The previous issue of the WACC Newsletter included an illustration of this.) Tree limbing is vital to creating vertical separation between a potential fire on the surface and the vulnerable tree crowns.

If brush or other bushy vegetation exists beneath trees, limbing will need to be higher to ensure a sufficient gap between the branches and the understory vegetation. See CalFire guidelines for specifics on this.

Fuel Ladders

Tree limbing is one step in the elimination of fuel ladders, which are combinations of flammable vegetation or materials starting at the surface and working their way upward onto trees or structures. We need to eliminate such combinations wherever found on our lots.

Think Like a Fire

A fire really doesn't care how much or how little you spent on your home. It simply seeks flammable materials to thrive. Embers most easily ignite light fuels such as pine needles or dry shakes, but the fire quickly progresses to heavier materials. If you keep easily ignited materials away from your home, an ignition in your yard might be nothing more than a minor scare.

Separating combustible materials in the yard is a prudent way to ensure that a fire that starts in one area won't rapidly spread. An isolated patch of junipers might be perfectly acceptable in the yard, for example, if it won't ignite structures or other nearby vegetation.

One handy way to do a self-evaluation of your yard surface is to walk through it while asking yourself: "Would I feel comfortable dropping a series of lighted matches in this area?" If you can honestly say "Yes" to that question during our dry summer weather, then you probably have created a fire tolerant condition. If the answer is "No," then do something about it. Both you and your neighbors will be safer.

