

DEFENSIBLE SPACE EVALUATION GUIDANCE
El Dorado County Fire Safe Council (EDCFSC)
September 2019

1. Purpose:

- a) Defensible Space Evaluations (Evaluations) are conducted by Associate Fire Safe Council (FSC) members to advise property owners on how to develop or improve defensible space around property structures, and hence improve wildfire safety of their property.
- b) Evaluations are Advisory. FSC members have no enforcement authority; we are all members of our communities, friends with our neighbors and in the end we seek education and voluntary compliance. Volunteer FSCs should avoid being perceived as authoritarian.
- c) Evaluations focus on vegetation within the 100 foot radius of structures. Home hardening is not generally part of Evaluations, and Evaluators should not be officially advising on home hardening.
- d) Each council can decide how they want to conduct their review activities. Some standard practices are provided herein.
- e) Community outreach should inform homeowners of the importance of defensible space and that FSC Evaluations are available.
- f) As part of ongoing council efforts FSCs should be coordinating with local fire district / department or CAL FIRE to understand their needs and goals, and how those can be coordinated with FSC activities.

2. Background:

- a) Defensible Space is vegetation management around structures to reduce the threat of wildfire, and is based on Public Resource Code 4291 (PRC 4291). PRC 4291 addresses vegetation within 100 of a Home, Shed or other structure. It is NOT a best practices law, it is a minimum standard.
- b) Defensible Space is the buffer around a home or structure that helps protect from heat, flames, and embers during a wildfire. By maintaining vegetation and combustibles in this area, property owners reduce the likelihood that their home will ignite during a fire. Maintaining Defensible Space around all structures is **REQUIRED BY LAW** (PRC 4291). Defensible space is also important to help protect firefighters when they are defending a structure.
- c) Structures are generally considered any building over 120 SF. Evaluations generally address any structure on a property, not just homes.

- d) Creating an area of defensible space around a structure does not mean a ring of bare dirt. Through proper planning, one can have both a beautiful landscape and a fire resistant structure. The CAL FIRE publication “Ready-Set-Go” provides valuable vegetation management information for property owners.
- e) The El Dorado County Vegetation Management Ordinance (EDC VMO) confirms the 100’ requirement of PRC 4291 as county standard and furthers the requirement through a “good neighbor” clause whereby a neighbor may be required to clear some of their property in order for their neighbor to obtain 100’ defensible space. Example 1: Property owner A clears their property to the property line, but the property line is within 100’ of owner A’s home. In order to obtain 100’ defensible space the neighbor property owner B will be required to treat a space on their property whereby owner A’s property achieves 100’ defensible space.
- f) Only CAL FIRE has the authority to enforce PRC 4291 through Defensible Space Inspections. Only El Dorado County has the authority to enforce EDC VMO. Defensible Space Evaluations are conducted by EDCFSC Volunteers to educate and assist homeowners with compliance to PRC 4291 and to the EDC VMO and local ordinances.
- g) EDCFSC Evaluations for Senior or Veteran Programs are slightly different, are conducted only by the EDCFSC, and are not guided by this Procedure.
- h) Evaluation is only a recommendation of vegetation clearance to reduce wildfire hazard; it is not intended to fire proof a property.

3. References:

- a) EDCFSC Defensible Space Evaluation Form.
- b) PRC 4291.
- c) EDC VMO.
- d) Ready-Set-Go (CAL FIRE)
- e) “Homeowners Checklist” (CAL FIRE)
- f) “Evacuation Tips” (CAL FIRE)
- g) Property Inspection Guide (CA State Fire Marshall, USFS, BLM)
- h) “Be Ember Aware” (Univ. of Nevada Reno Extension).

4. Defensible Space Evaluation Volunteers:

- a) Volunteers will be trained by CAL FIRE and carry Defensible Space Evaluator identification cards provided by EDCFSC.
- b) Volunteers sign a hold harmless agreement. Volunteers are not employees, and are not covered by workers compensation. Volunteers are covered under their own health insurance, and waive any form of claims, losses, damage or injuries (trip, slips or fall, angry homeowner, etc)
- c) In some cases, members of other FSCs can provide assistance and volunteers as needed.
- d) Forms are available from the EDCFSC and kept at Rescue Station #83. Place your request with EDCFSC Clerk, and to make any necessary arrangements for form pickup.

- e) Evaluators do not enter a property without permission of an adult homeowner. They are trained to walk up to a front door (through an unlocked front gate at the street, if present, under rules of cartilage below), and knock to introduce themselves. If no adult is present, they have two options: 1) inspect the property as visible from the front door or public areas such as from the front pathway or roadway, or 2) come back later. Under no circumstances do Evaluators enter locked or gated areas of a property without permission of a homeowner, and do not "peek" over fences. They only evaluate areas that are plainly visible from common/ public area unless an adult owner gives permission to gated areas.

5. Homeowners:

- a) Homeowners have an expectation of privacy.
- b) “In law, the curtilage of a house or dwelling is the land immediately surrounding it, including any closely associated buildings and structures, but excluding any associated "open fields beyond", and also excluding any closely associated buildings, structures, or divisions that contain the separate intimate activities of their own respective occupants with those occupying residents being persons other than those residents of the house or dwelling of which the building is associated. It delineates the boundary within which a home owner can have a reasonable expectation of privacy and where "intimate home activities" take place. It is an important legal concept in certain jurisdictions for the understanding of search and seizure, conveyancing of real property, burglary, trespass, and land use planning” (Wikipedia).
- c) To not be in trespass, a person may walk up a driveway to the entry way of a home. A person may walk into what is known as “OPEN FIELDS” ... land not intimately used by the residents.

6. Preparation:

- a) Evaluation requests will come from EDCFSC, Community Councils or from individual residents.
- b) Safety: How do you not become a suspicious person reported to the sheriff?
 - 1) Carry identification. Expectation of people to be identified.
 - 2) Be presentable. Wear shirt with Council logo if possible.
 - 3) Work in Pairs.
- c) Do not leave Evaluation forms with homeowners that decline Evaluation.
- d) Evaluators should generally not be a neighbor adjacent to the property being evaluated.
- e) Carry identification lanyard, clipboard, evaluation forms, and guidance handouts for owner.

- f) Check property location on maps or phone navigation.
- g) Make appointment with owner, and call ahead to let owner you are actually coming.
- h) The “Property Inspection Guide” provides useful information for conducting inspections.
- i) Acquire EDCFSC red small “Go Bags”, to hold handouts, to be provided to owner.
- j) Handouts can be provided to owner for wildfire safety information, including suggested handouts:

“Ready-Set-Go” (CAL FIRE).

“Homeowners Checklist” (CAL FIRE).

“Be Ember Aware” (University of Nevada Reno Extension) or “Ember Awareness Checklist” portion of this document.

“Evacuation Tips” (CAL FIRE).

“Go Bag” checklist

7. Conduct Evaluation:

- a) Greet and identify yourself and your role. Hand business card to homeowner. This can also be an opportunity to educate the owner about the FSC.
- b) Ask homeowner what concerns they have before starting any evaluation
- c) Number Evaluation sheet for FSC reference later with 2019 - ##. The top white sheet goes to the homeowner.
- d) Most evaluators are not trained in home hardening, so Evaluation should focus just on vegetation subjects. “Homeowners Checklist” from CAL FIRE discusses home hardening and resources for homeowner. Refer homeowner to brochure in handouts.
- e) After Evaluation, debrief owner on all findings.
 - 1) Ask for their concerns and questions.
 - 2) Provide top, white sheet to homeowner.
 - 3) Emphasize that just making a start on defensible space improvements is the key; does not have to be done all at once.
 - 4) Ask if they have any help from relatives or friends/neighbors.
 - 5) Refer to EDCFSC Chipper Program.
 - 6) Refer to Senior and/or Veteran Programs when applicable.
 - 7) Ask about evacuation plan and provide EDCFSC “Go Bag” with handouts.
- f) At the conclusion of the Evaluation, discuss with the owner a time frame for when corrective action can be completed, and schedule a return to verify that completion. Note it may be that the homeowner is unable either physically and/or financially to perform the corrective action. In that case advise the homeowner of possible support agencies, especially for Seniors and Veterans.

8. Post Evaluation:

- a) White top sheet goes to the homeowner.
 - 1) Yellow copy stays with FSC.
 - 2) Yellow copy can be scanned for records retention purposes.

- b) When performing Evaluations, CAL FIRE has requested that scanned copies be provided to them so they can record the activity. FSCs have the option to provide copies to CAL FIRE. FSCs should discuss the pros and cons of this action, and develop their process. Some homeowners may object to copies going to a Government agency.

- c) FSCs should keep a database of Evaluations, including lists of Evaluation requests and of completed Evaluations, including property owner name, address and applicable dates, and pdf of all Evaluations. It is desirable for a FSC to have an Evaluation Coordinator.

- d) Identify any Lessons Learned and pass along to FSC Defensible Space Evaluation Coordinator, and to EDCFSC as necessary.