

Wildfire FAQs

4-29-2018

With prevailing westerly winds and so much wildland area with extreme fuel loads to the west, what is the point of improving wildfire safety in our community?

The significant wildfire risk is the reason to increase defensible space and harden our homes against this peril. The risk from the west is consistent, though some of the most devastating fire models involve fire spread from Pacheco Valley to the north driven by late fall Diablo winds which were a major factor in the 2017 North Bay fires.

Residents bordering open space have been asked to clear firebreaks on CSA 13 property. Why should they bear the effort and cost of maintaining firebreaks that benefit the entire community?

Our entire community lies within the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) and subject to the applicable State and County regulations. All residents are responsible for maintaining defensible space to protect their property and their neighbors' property. All residents need to do more to help reduce the wildfire risk by meeting defensible space requirements.

What are the defensible space requirements?

There are many elements including fire resistant building practices, maintenance and landscaping. These are some of the recommended practices to reduce wildfire risk in our community:

- Within 5 ft. of the home, create a fire free area – limit plants to high-moisture content annuals and perennials; keep roofs and gutters free of debris; cover vents with 1/8 inch wire mesh; screen the underside of combustible decks; use a non-combustible barrier between the house and combustible fencing; use hardscape, crushed stone or rock rather than combustible mulch
- Within 10 ft. of the home – choose non-combustible furniture; limb up trees 6 to 10 ft.; prune back trees to keep limbs 10 ft. from the house
- Within 30 ft. of the home – eliminate shredded bark, use ½ inch or larger wood chips for mulch; remove or enclose firewood stacks; choose low growing and fire resistant plants; keep shrubs at least 10 ft. away from lower tree limbs; space conifer trees at least 30 ft. between crowns
- From 30 to 100 ft. of the home – cut annual grasses to 3 inches or less; leave 30 ft. between tree clusters; limb up trees to 10 ft. and space trees so crowns do not touch; remove undergrowth, brush and ladder fuels beneath trees
- From 100 to 200 ft. – remove conifers growing between taller trees; remove invasive, flammable bushes such as pampas grass; remove accumulations of dead wood; reduce deep accumulations of leaf litter

Why does LVHA recommend a 150 ft. defensible space standard – the CA Public Resources Code 4291 requires 100 ft. from the structure or to the property line, whichever is less?

Clearance and defensible space standards continue to evolve. PRC 4291 changed from 30 ft. to 100 ft. in 2005. Recent fire experience may spark a reevaluation of this standard. The regulation cannot require residents to clear vegetation on property they do not control. It states that clearance beyond the

property line requires the adjacent property owner's permission. LVHA residents have this permission from the County of Marin for CSA 13 lands.

Marinwood Fire Dept. has surveyed our community over the past few years and found the standard of 100 ft. from the residence to provide inadequate protection from wildfire. Residents have been asked to clear 100 ft. from the property line which provides significantly more protection for the many properties with mature, fire prone trees and vegetation adjacent to the wildlands. Nearly all residents adjacent to the hills have complied with this standard.

Due to the considerable variance in lot sizes, a standard of 150 ft. from the residence provides similar protection and a more consistent requirement for residents. FIREsafe Marin recommends 100 to 200 ft. and Firewise guidance suggests 150 ft. In many cases, this standard will allow less prescriptive clearance and spacing requirements inside the property line.

PRC 4291 also requires 100 ft. on all sides. Most of our homes have 50 years of mature landscaping and as little as 10 ft. between the roof lines of adjacent homes separated by combustible fences. Evaluating defensible space needs within 150 ft. of the residence to minimize exposure to wildland fuels is a realistic alternative to requiring removal of all mature, flammable vegetation within 30 ft. of the residence.

The 2017 North Bay fires offer some important lessons. An example: The owner of the sole surviving home in one Fountain Grove neighborhood attributed that outcome to clearing 200 ft. of defensible space.

We have never been asked to take these actions. Why now?

Advances in fire science and fire experience continue to evolve and impact regulations and recommended best practices. Our hills haven't burned in 30 years and have accumulated the fuel for a worst case scenario.

Do I need permission to clear firebreaks and create defensible space on CSA 13 land adjacent to my property?

LVHA residents have permission to clear firebreaks, including removal of invasive plants and flammable bushes on CSA 13 land. Our CSA 13 representative should be consulted concerning removal of trees and native bushes.

What can I do if my neighbor has a fire hazard or flammable landscaping that compromises my defensible space?

Neighbors and neighborhoods should work together to meet defensible space requirements. Marin Co Fire can inspect and cite properties that are out of compliance with defensible space guidelines.

My neighbor is a renter and the owner lives out of the area. What can be done to enforce defensible space requirements? Defensible space requirements apply to "A person who owns, leases, controls, operates, or maintains a building or structure in, upon, or adjoining a mountainous area, forest-covered lands, brush-covered lands, grass-covered lands ...".

If a lease agreement restricts vegetation management actions by the renter, the owner is clearly responsible. Hazardous conditions may be cited by the local fire agency, if required to initiate action by the owner. The LVHA Business Manager has contact information for non-resident owners.

Is there an ordinance requiring removal of fire prone plants such as juniper?

The City of San Rafael has such an [ordinance restricting juniper](#) within the Wildland Urban Interface (Municipal Code 4.12). LVHA is in County jurisdiction which has no regulation specific to juniper. The entire LVHA community is within the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) and subject to WUI regulations governing building construction and defensible space requirements. Separation of a residence structure from fire prone vegetation such as juniper, cypress, bamboo and pampas grass is a key component of the defensible space requirements.

Has LVHA considered using animals for vegetation management?

Cattle grazed the hills of what is now CSA 13 when the community was developed. They were removed when some residents failed to maintain their fencing. Sheep were used at one time, but were considered too pastoral by some residents who objected to the sound, disturbance of their pets (mostly dogs), and the fertilizer left behind. Goats are used throughout the Bay Area for vegetation management and have been proposed as a solution twice in the past 5 years. Although they were significantly less expensive (in 2014 and 2015) than mechanical clearing, the proposals were not approved. They remain a viable alternative for some of our vegetation management needs.

Is the LVHA community a part of the FIRESafe MARIN program?

LVHA is applying for a [Firewise USA](#) Site certification. FIRESafe MARIN serves as regional coordinator for the Firewise program. FIRESafe MARIN supports many different wildfire safety activities that can benefit LVHA community efforts to reduce wildfire risk.

Where can I find recommendations for fire resistant plants to replace my fire prone plants?

We plan to add this information to LHVA.org. These web sites each have lists of fire resistant and fire prone plants: [FIRESafe MARIN](#); [Fire Safe San Mateo County](#).

Emergency notification systems failed in the North Bay fires. What can we expect in Marin?

An emergency evacuation warning and/or evacuation order would come through Marin Office of Emergency Services (OES). Marin OES uses an automated system to send notifications by phone to all numbers in its database associated with a geographic area subject to an emergency warning or an evacuation order. OES has all landline phone numbers, however, it is essential that residents register their mobile numbers at www.AlertMarin.org to receive alerts on those devices. Other notification systems such as Nixle are recommended in addition to AlertMarin which is the principal means of OES emergency communications.

The Marin Sheriff's Office would support an evacuation order with neighborhood notifications (drive through/door knock). Fire personnel such as Marinwood Fire Dept. may help, in a situation as dire as the North Bay fires, though that is not their principal role.

One of the lessons from the fires of 2017 is not to rely solely on our public agencies - there will never be enough resources to meet such expectations. Sound reason to reduce our risk and prepare for the worst case scenario.

What is the cost of compliance with WUI construction requirements?

Costs vary with the needs of the property and the model of the home is a key factor. A WUI approved vent may cost \$30 compared with \$5 for a 1/8 inch screen framed foundation vent. Most Eichler homes have air vents only in the garage, and are easy to retrofit. American Guild models may have more complex vent installations. American Guild homes have rain gutters that should be screened while Eichlers have unscreened roof troughs. Glass replacement is typically more expensive for Eichlers due to their large area windows.

Other construction features are similar for most modes. Adding screening to protect a deck is not expensive, though the cost of replacement with non-combustible materials can be significant. The costs of re-landscaping vary with the size of the lot and nature of the existing vegetation.

Are there opportunities for cost savings through group purchase?

If there is sufficient interest, we will investigate potential savings through research with vendors and contractors.