

How to be Fire Safe at The Sea Ranch

Frequently Asked Questions about Creating Defensible Space

What is “Defensible Space”?

Defensible space is the term used to describe vegetation management practices that reduce flammable materials around your home so that firefighters can defend it effectively in the event of a wildfire.

What is required?

Last year the California State Legislature extended the requirements for creating “defensible space” around your home from 30 feet to a new standard of 100 feet or more. Under PRC 4291, homeowners are legally responsible for managing the vegetation up to their property line or up to 100 feet, whichever is closer.

Do I have to remove all the vegetation within 100 feet of my house?

Creating defensible space does NOT require clear-cutting or removal of all plants near your house. Best practices include mowing grasses to within 30 feet of your home; clearing brush, excessive duff and deadwood; and trimming off low tree branches to prevent fires from spreading up into the canopy. Other techniques include removing plant varieties which are more flammable (such as decadent coyote bush) and clustering and separating plants, rather than allowing dense, continuous vegetation. Each site, whether forested, meadow, or coastal scrub, requires a different strategy for creating defensible space.

The *Living With Fire In Sonoma County* booklet published by local fire agencies provides excellent and detailed guidelines for homeowners who wish to create defensible space. This publication is available at The Sea Ranch Association office and at the Cal Fire Station on Annapolis Road or at www.firesafesonoma.org.

Why are we having Cal Fire inspections now?

Cal Fire inspectors are currently visiting Sea Ranch homes to review with homeowners the actions they need to take under the new law to create an effective defensible space. The Association has provided \$40,000 in funds to accelerate the rate of inspections so that all Sea Ranch homes can be inspected by spring of next year.

You can request an appointment to meet with an inspector by calling 785-2648. The inspector can advise you on what is required and suggest specific steps you can take to ensure a more defensible space around your home.

Standard fuel management practices such as mowing will not require a permit. If the work needed to make your home fire-safe is more extensive and does require a permit, you should attach a copy of the Cal Fire Inspection Report to your application.

What are the procedures for creating defensible space around my home?

When considering requests for vegetation removal, the Department of Design, Compliance and Environmental Management (DCEM) follows the standard policies

and procedures outlined in The Sea Ranch Design Manual and Rules (Section 7.4 Vegetation Management). The DCEM staff coordinates closely with Cal Fire inspectors and with homeowners to create defensible space, while also taking into account other important homeowner values such as privacy and maintaining the natural character of the site.

Although PRC 4291 only requires you to be concerned about the vegetation on your own property, you may wish to extend defensible space for your home beyond your property line. Below is a summary of what procedures to use when you want to remove vegetation on:

- your own property
- commons adjacent to your property
- neighboring private properties.

What procedures do I follow to remove or trim vegetation on my property?

The Association encourages homeowners to keep vegetation around their homes trimmed to reduce fire risk. When you are planning to remove vegetation on your own property, you need to check with the DCEM staff by calling 785-2316. You will not usually need to file a formal proposal if your work is limited to:

- Mowing
- Removing branches or other trimming of trees and shrubs
- Removing trees which are less than 6 feet in height or have trunks less than 6 inches in diameter at the base
- Removing shrubs which are less than 6 feet in height or 6 feet wide
- Removing brush, deadwood, excessive duff or other plant debris

You may need to file a Tree Proposal Application form if the vegetation you plan to remove requires a permit under Section 7.4 of the Design Manual rules. You would normally need a permit to:

- Remove or substantially alter trees with trunks 6 inches or greater in diameter
- Remove shrubs which are more than 6 feet in height or 6 feet wide
- Remove stumps larger than 3 feet in height or 2 feet in diameter
- Remove logs larger than 2 feet in diameter or 8 feet in length
- Remove trees or shrubs planted as part of a landscape plan required by the Design Committee.

What procedures do I use for extending defensible space for my home onto commons?

If your property adjoins commons and you want to extend your defensible space into a commons area, you must check with DCEM staff prior to making any alterations in vegetation. Most vegetation removal that homeowners undertake to meet PRC 4291 requirements is quickly and informally approved and does not require any formal proposal or permit. If, you, the homeowner request and receive permission to extend your defensible space onto adjacent commons, you will be responsible for the costs.

- If vegetation work on commons is limited to mowing grass and/or removing a limited amount of deadwood or brush, a formal application usually will not be required. You should consult with DCEM staff, who will give informal approval for you to proceed. The homeowner is responsible for clearing all debris created by your vegetation removal.
- If the work is more extensive and will result in considerable debris, an encroachment permit and a refundable deposit may be required. If an encroachment permit is needed, the DCEM staff can fill out the form for you.
- If your planned work includes the removal of trees 6 inches or greater in diameter and/or shrubs 6 feet in height or width, or it substantially impacts habitat or neighborhood views or privacy, you may need to file a formal Tree Proposal Application and follow the process outlined in Design Manual section 7.4.4. The DCEM staff will advise you on whether you need a formal proposal.

In general, if the work you plan to do follows the recommendations of the Cal Fire inspection, it will be approved. The formal Tree Proposal is required only in special circumstances so that neighbors who may be impacted have an opportunity to comment on the proposed removal of vegetation. The DCEM staff will work with homeowners, neighbors and the Cal Fire inspectors to resolve any issues that arise, with highest priority given to fire safety.

What if I want to extend defensible space for my home onto my neighbor's property?

The Association encourages neighbors to work together to create defensible space on their properties. As a homeowner, your legal responsibility only extends to your property line, but you may wish to extend beyond your property line, particularly if the defensible space to your property line is less than the recommended 100 feet.

Your neighbor's legal responsibility is to protect his or her home with 100 feet of defensible space. If your neighbor's home is further than 100 feet from the property line you share or if the lot is undeveloped, your neighbor is not required by law to remove vegetation in order to provide defensible space for your home.

If you wish to remove vegetation on your neighbor's property to extend your defensible space, you first need to receive permission from your neighbor. The DCEM can assist you with this process. Once you receive permission, you also need to check with the DCEM regarding the work you plan to do. Unless you and your neighbor make other arrangements, you, as the homeowner creating defensible space for your home, are responsible for all costs and debris removal.

*Fire Safety Task Force and
Department of Design, Compliance
and Environmental Management*