

## Anchorage Wildfire: Dare to Prepare: From Portage to Eklutna

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If you haven't already heard about it, there is a major effort underway this spring (2001) to educate Anchorage residents about the risks of wildfire. The Anchorage Soil and Water Conservation District received a grant from the US Forest Service through the Alaska Department of Natural Resources to reduce the risk of wildfire in the Municipality of Anchorage. This is being accomplished through public education, hazard mitigation on public lands and compiling the necessary environmental data to understand the level of wildfire fuel loads and risk through fire modeling.

As part of the public education committee, I have been working to educate residents about the concept of defensible space. The first place I found I needed to start was in my yard and my office where one of my coworkers scoffed, "Defensible space means the fire department wants you to create a 30 foot moonscape devoid of vegetation around your home". As a gardener and also a volunteer firefighter in Girdwood, I realized there are a lot of misconceptions about defensible space.

Defensible space in plain language means removing flammables from immediately around your home. Why? Because in a wildfire, it might not be a wall of flame that causes your home to catch on fire, it could be offshoots of small projectiles of fire raining down in your yard. The more objects ignitable near or next to your home, the better the chance the ignition of these items might catch your home on fire. The reality of a wildfire is that there will not be a fire crew at each house defending your property, so it's your responsibility to try and make your property as fire resistant as possible. Does that mean remove all vegetation, no. It just means take the time and responsibility to make your yard more fire resistant.

Look at your yard and think about... if there was a wildfire what could small fire spots raining down on my yard catch on fire? Remove the firewood from next to the house, clean out the leaves accumulated in roof gutters, finally get around to removing the piles of leaves raked last summer, prune back the dead tree branches touching the house, and remove any dead spruce kill. Think about and investigate fire resistant vegetation options.

Next think, if there was a wildfire I might have 15 minutes to gather everything and evacuate my home, could I do it? Do I have a plan of where my family will meet or who to call as an emergency contact? Do I know to different ways to leave my subdivision and neighborhood? Please also make sure your address is clearly marked and make sure your driveway is accessible and wide enough for emergency vehicles. Learn where the nearest fire hydrant is located. A few hours of pre-planning and yard maintenance is a worthy investment in your home and property.

Ready to start? There are many informative and enthusiastic resources available to Anchorage residents! First, please pick up a Firewise packet at your local fire station to learn more about defensible space and how to prepare. Sue Rodman, the Anchorage Fire

Department Forester (267-4902) is available to discuss homeowner tree harvest options, defensible space and mitigation efforts on public lands. Patricia Joyner and John See (269-8465), from the Alaska Community Forestry Program have information on fire resistant vegetation alternatives. The UAF Cooperative Extension Service (786-6300) is available to assist homeowners with spruce bark beetle damage evaluations and treatment options. On the web you can also log onto [firewise.org](http://firewise.org). For general information about the Anchorage Wildfire Project, contact Bill Sobers (279-2424 ex.107) Anchorage Soil and Water Conservation District Executive Director.