

Defensible space saving homes at Colorado fires

June 14, 2018

[Share \(31\)](#) [Tweet](#) [Comments \(0\)](#) [Email](#) [Print](#) [+](#)



Matt Stensland

Bill Gossard uses a chainsaw to cut down a lodgepole pine tree at the Steamboat Ski Area alongside the Main Drag ski trail as part of a 100-acre logging project to remove beetle-killed lodgepole pine trees.

STEAMBOAT SPRINGS — Mitigation work and other steps taken to protect property from wildfires have paid off at wildfires burning in Colorado.

No structures have been lost at either the 416 Fire near Durango or the Buffalo Mountain Fire that started Wednesday near Silverthorne. At that fire, nearly 1,400 homes were evacuated, and the fire created spot fires within 250 feet of homes.

For more than a decade, fire mitigation and creating defensible space around homes has been a priority in Routt County after the mountain pine beetle nearly wiped out the population of lodgepole pine trees.

The needles on the dead trees turned red, and the stands of trees became tinder boxes.

Steamboat Ski Area did considerable work to remove dead trees on the ski mountain, and local fire districts worked with the Colorado State Forest Service and federal land partners to develop community wildfire protection plans and remove the dead timber. Grant dollars helped pay for the projects.

"In that plan, they identified a lot of projects to mitigate along subdivision boundaries and private property boundaries with the forest," North Routt Fire Protection District Chief Mike Swinsick said. "Since then, a lot of those projects have been completed. There are still some that are in progress."

A lot of work was done to remove conifer trees along U.S. Forest Service roads, which encouraged aspen trees to grow instead.

"Ranchers and property owners have been doing a lot of their own work," Swinsick said. "I think there is still a lot of work to be done, but I think overall they did a lot to put a dent in what was in the original plan."

Open burning was allowed during certain parts of the year, which gave landowners a way to dispose of brush and slash piles. Swinsick said the fire district worked closely with landowners to decide what and when to burn.

The North Routt Fire District has been able to add some tools to their arsenal should a fire break out, such as a side-by-side vehicle equipped with a water tank and pump that will allow them to attack fires in rugged areas.

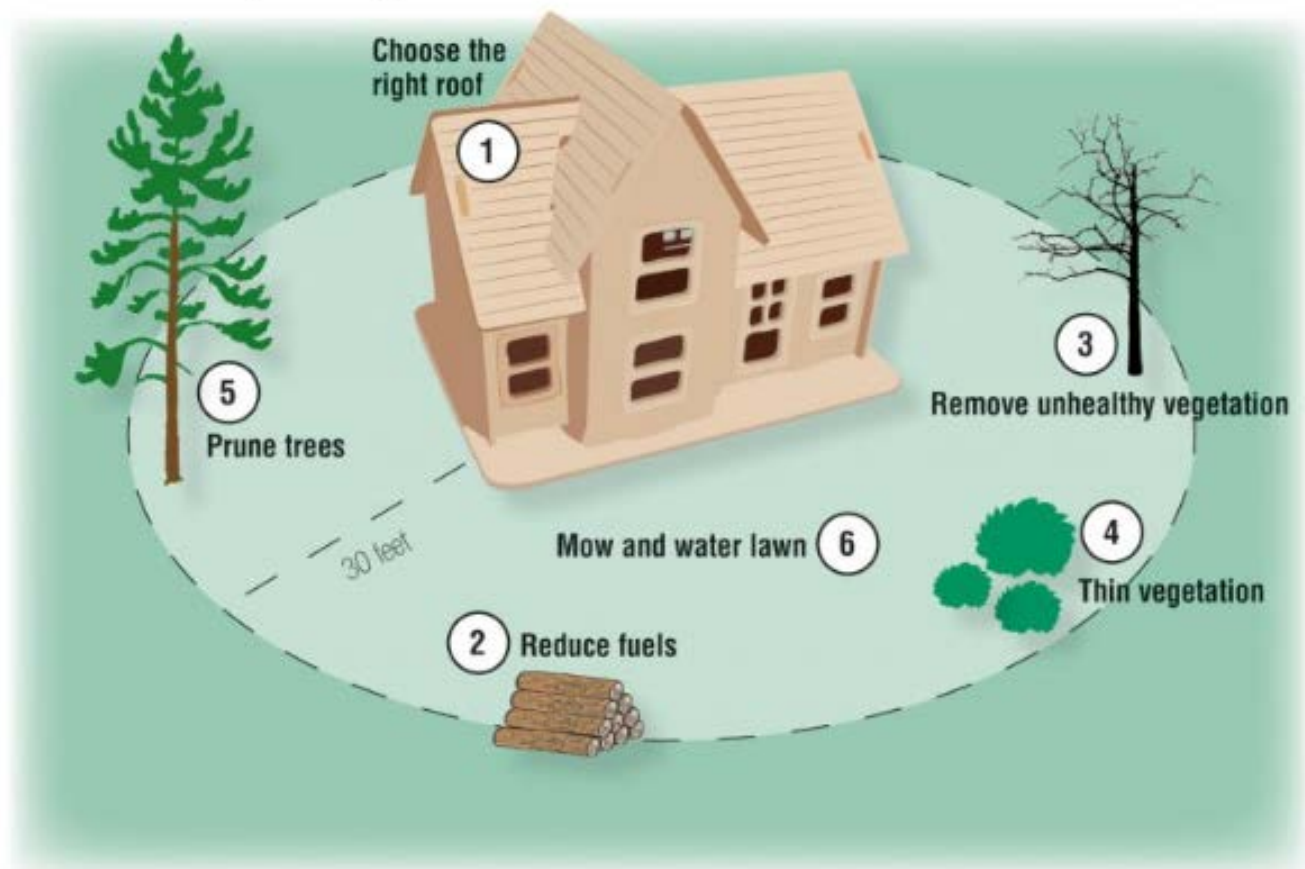
Every year, when July approaches and the landscape begins to dry out, attitudes shift in forested neighborhoods, especially after an active fire season like the one in 2017.

"I would say the overall mood is they are a little nervous," Swinsick said. "There have been a few folks asking why we haven't put restrictions in place, yet. Those conversations are going to start happening next week with all the federal partners and local chiefs."

To reach Matt Stensland, call [970-871-4247](tel:970-871-4247), email mstensland@SteamboatToday.com or follow him on Twitter [@SBTStensland](https://twitter.com/SBTStensland).

Don't fuel the fire

Learn how to protect your home from flames



Learn the lingo

■ Defensible space

An area around a structure where fuels and vegetation are treated, cleared or reduced to slow the spread of wildfire toward the structure. It also reduces the chance of a structure fire moving from the buildings to the surrounding forest. Defensible space also provides room for firefighters to do their jobs. Your house is more likely to withstand a wildfire if grasses, brush, trees and other common forest fuels are managed to reduce a fire's intensity.

■ Wildland-urban interface

The area where structures and other human development meet or intermingle with undeveloped wildland. The expansion of the WUI in recent decades has significant implications for wildfire management. The WUI creates an environment in which fire can move readily between structural and vegetation fuels. Its expansion has increased the likelihood that wildfires will threaten structures and people.

Fire safety checklist

1. Choose the right roof

It is important to choose a fire-resistant roofing material that is rated Class C or higher when building a house in or near forests or grasslands. Avoid flammable materials such as wood or shake shingles. It also is important to clean the roof and gutters of pine needles and leaves at least twice a year to eliminate an ignition source for potential fires.

2. Reduce fuels

Stack firewood away and uphill from your home. Do not stack firewood under the deck. Store and use flammable liquids properly.

3. Remove unhealthy vegetation

Trees and shrubs that are stressed, diseased, dead or dying should be removed so they do not become a fuel source for potential fires.

4. Thin vegetation

The first 30 feet surrounding your home are the most important. Carefully space trees around your property. Maintain an irrigated greenbelt immediately around your home using grass or a flower garden. Plants in this area should be limited to low-flammability species. An alternative is rock or another noncombustible material. Avoid using bark or wood-chip mulch in this area.

5. Prune trees

Keep trees and shrubs properly pruned. Prune all trees so the lowest limbs are 6 to 10 feet from the ground and 10 feet from a roof or chimney. Dispose of cuttings and debris promptly.

6. Mow and water lawn

Mow lawn regularly, and be sure the irrigation system is well-maintained.

For more information about defensible space, visit firewise.org.