

# Boulder County's Defensible Space FAQ

## Why does Boulder County require wildfire mitigation?

Western wildfires are increasing in frequency, size, and severity. The 2015 fire season in the United States set a new record for the number of acres burned—10,125,149 acres from a total of 68,151 wildfires. Although 2015 was not a notable wildfire year here, Boulder County has experienced several destructive wildfires in recent times, including the 2010 Fourmile Canyon Fire that destroyed 168 homes, burned 6,181 acres, and cost \$217 million in insured losses. In addition, the 2016 Cold Springs Fire destroyed 8 homes and 7 outbuildings, evacuated nearly 2,000 residents, burned 528 acres, and cost nearly \$2.5 million in insured losses. The silver lining behind the Cold Springs Fire is the success stories of wildfire mitigation. Within the fire perimeter, there were 13 homes that had gone through the Site Plan Review process and met the wildfire requirements associated with the Building and Land Use Codes. All of these homes did not burn in the fire. Furthermore, there were eight Wildfire Partners homes in the fire perimeter and none of these homes burned in the fire. All 19 structures in the fire perimeter that had implemented the required mitigation measures for the Regulatory Wildfire Mitigation Program and Wildfire Partners Program made it through the fire, which is a true testament to the effectiveness of the programs. It is also important to note, that two homes in the burn perimeter participated in both Wildfire Partners and the Regulatory Program. However, some people still don't recognize the severity of the risk posed by wildfire and are unclear regarding what they can do to effectively reduce that threat. Boulder County believes everyone in the foothills and mountains should prepare for future wildfire because it is a question of when, not if, the next major wildland fire will occur in Boulder County.

Wildfires have always been a natural occurrence in Boulder County, but over the last 100 years, various land use practices, including fire suppression, have resulted in some forests with vegetation densities 10 to 100 times their natural state. Heavy fuel loads—combined with factors such as steep terrain, drought, rising temperatures, high winds, and an increased human presence—increase the occurrence of extreme wildfire behavior and limit the effectiveness of firefighters.

The good news is that wildfire mitigation, as required by the Boulder County Land Use and Building Codes, is an important step towards reducing the risk of your home being destroyed by wildfire. By properly siting your home, constructing it with ignition resistant materials, creating adequate defensible space, providing for emergency access and water supply, and performing routine maintenance around your property, you can significantly reduce the ignition potential of your home. While every wildfire is different, studies show that as many as 80 percent of the homes lost to wildland fire could have been saved if their owners had only followed a few simple fire-safe practices.

## How do I determine if defensible space is required for my project?

Generally, you will be required to create and maintain defensible space if you are in Wildfire Management Zone 1 (this zone is located in the foothills and mountains, approximately west of highways 7, 36, or 93—see <http://www.bouldercounty.org/doc/landuse/firezone.pdf>) of unincorporated Boulder County, and you are adding more than 200 square feet of floor area, building a new deck, or adding on to or repairing an existing deck.

### **What are Boulder County’s defensible space standards and how are they implemented?**

The Colorado State Forest Service publication, “Protecting Your Home from Wildfire: Creating Wildfire-Defensible Zones, 2012 Quick Guide” is the approved standard for meeting the Boulder County defensible space requirements. To implement these standards, Boulder County has developed two defensible space options—Wildfire Partners Certification and Regulatory Wildfire Mitigation.

### **What is Wildfire Partners?**

Most homes that burn in wildfires ignite because of embers; Wildfire Partners helps homeowners identify and mitigate those vulnerabilities, in addition to vulnerabilities to crown and surface fire.

Wildfire Partners is a collaborative program to help homeowners in Boulder County prepare for wildfire. Wildfire Partners provides homeowners with technical and financial assistance as well as formal recognition for conducting mitigation. Homeowner participation in a comprehensive on-site assessment with a Wildfire Mitigation Specialist is a key feature of the program. Visit [www.WildfirePartners.org](http://www.WildfirePartners.org) to learn more.

### **What are the advantages of selecting the Wildfire Partners option?**

Besides the benefits of a more effective and comprehensive approach to wildfire mitigation, we encourage homeowners to pursue the Wildfire Partners route because it offers several additional benefits:

- 1) Wildfire Partners educates homeowners about wildfire behavior, mitigation and preparedness and empowers them to take action to reduce their risk and help create more resilient communities
- 2) The Wildfire Partners Certificate helps homeowners obtain insurance
- 3) The Wildfire Partners Certificate helps homeowners sell their homes
- 4) Wildfire Partners provides on-going technical assistance, support, and recognition to homeowners
- 5) Wildfire Partners includes re-certification to assist with insurance and the sale of homes in the future
- 6) Wildfire Partners has limited grant-funding to subsidize the cost of the on-site assessment, tree marking, and tree removed completed before October 1, 2018.

### **When do I select my defensible space option?**

You will select your defensible space option and have an on-site wildfire assessment with an assigned Wildfire Mitigation Specialist prior to the issuance of a building permit.

### **Who will conduct my on-site assessment?**

You will be assigned a Wildfire Mitigation Specialist who will conduct your assessment, answer your questions, and perform your inspection. All specialists have a wealth of forest knowledge, wildfire mitigation experience, and will provide outstanding customer service. During the visit, the Wildfire Mitigation Specialist will help educate you about the science of wildland fire and will discuss what steps to take reduce your structure(s) susceptibility to wildfire damage.

### **What will be included in my assessment?**

All wildfire mitigation assessments make recommended and required actions to reduce the probability of home ignition from crown and surface fires (defensible space/vegetation). The defensible space portion of the assessment are the same for all assessments for both paths—Wildfire Partners Certificate and Regulatory Wildfire Mitigation. If you chose the Wildfire Partners Certificate path, your assessment will also include an evaluation of

your home’s vulnerability to embers (50% of homes that burn in wildfires ignite because of embers) and make recommended and required actions to reduce those vulnerabilities. Your Wildfire Partners assessment will also address insurance, emergency preparedness and community involvement. To understand the type of mitigation measures typically required by this program, see the Wildfire Partners assessment handout and sample reports.

**What are my options for removing vegetation and other material marked during my site visit?**

After your assessment, you may be required to remove and dispose of vegetation. Boulder County has a list of approved forestry contractors who complete this type of work. Furthermore, there are two Community Forestry Sort Yards to dispose material: Nederland and Meeker Park. Please see <http://www.bouldercounty.org/property/forest/pages/fhsortyards.aspx> for more information on the sort yards.

**Typically, what mitigation measures on the home are applicants required to complete in order to obtain a Wildfire Partners Certificate?**

Every home is different so there is no such thing as a typical home. Some homes have several requirements; others have none. In general, the newer the home, the fewer the number of mitigation measures. The table below lists the types and frequency of home mitigation requirements identified in the 303 assessments completed by Wildfire Partners in 2017. While every home is different, these summary statistics provide a starting point for understanding your potential home mitigation requirements. This table does not include information on mitigation requirements for defensible space or accessory structures. Please note that both defensible space paths require a non-combustible surface in the first three to five feet around the home and attachments. Also note that while Wildfire Partners did not require any homeowner to replace siding in 2017, replacement may be required if siding poses a high risk and cannot be mitigated with other measures.

Mitigation Measures	% Required in 2017
Install an address marker	49%
Remove combustible material	49%
Mitigate accessory structure	37%
Mitigate around propane tank	33%
Remove combustible materials on deck	32%
Relocate firewood piles	31%
Mitigate base of walls	22%
Mitigate siding condition	22%
Mitigate vulnerable vents	18%
Mitigate openings in walls	13%
Remove or protect landscape timbers within 5 feet of home	11%
Clean out gutters	11%
Mitigate single-pane windows	8%
Install deck flashing	7%
Mitigate open eaves	7%
Remove combustible debris from roof	4%
Retrofit fence	3%
Install flashing at roof edge	3%
Mitigate complex roof features	2%
Install new weather stripping for garage door	1%
Fill roof gaps (metal/tile roofs)	1%
Replace windows	1%

**How long will it take to complete my wildfire mitigation requirements?**

There are numerous steps needed to complete Boulder County’s wildfire mitigation requirements. Some of these steps include (but are not limited to) meeting with a Wildfire Mitigation Specialist, establishing defensible space zones, removing vegetation, disposing of vegetation, retrofitting your home (if Wildfire Partners path is selected), and setting up and passing inspections. The amount of time required to complete each of these steps depends on certain factors such as the availability of forestry and retrofit contractors. Moreover, environmental factors such as weather, topography, and vegetation density/size can also affect how long the process may take. To put it simply, it depends.

**If I am not building a home, addition or deck, where can I go to seek wildfire mitigation assistance?**

The Wildfire Partners Voluntary Program serves individuals in existing homes who are looking to reduce their home’s vulnerability to wildfire. This is purely a voluntary program that assists homeowners who are interested in taking action. Wildfire Partners provides a comprehensive, on site assessment of the home ignition zone; a customized report detailing action one should take; and follow-up visits to ensure that you are fully prepared for future wildfires. Moreover, Wildfire Partners will help you earn a certificate and yard sign upon completion and can increase the insurability of your home. For more information, please visit [WildfirePartners.org](http://WildfirePartners.org)

**What are the differences between homeowners who enroll in Wildfire Partners for their existing home as a result of the building permit process and those who apply voluntarily?**

There are no differences.