

THE LIMITATIONS OF WILDLAND FIREFIGHTING

FLAME LENGTH	EFFECTIVE FIREFIGHTING TACTICS
Less than 4 ft	Firelines constructed with hand tools, such as shovels and axes, can be effective at the front of the fire.
4 to 8 ft	Bulldozers and other heavy equipment will be needed to construct an effective fireline. Where bulldozers are not available, fire engines with hoses and water will be required to “knock down” the flames before the fire crews with hand tools can be effective, or fire crews must construct a fireline at a considerable distance from the fire.
8 to 11 ft	Airtankers with fire suppressing retardant or helicopters with water are required to reduce the fire’s rate of spread before fireline construction by crews or bulldozers can be effective.
More than 11 ft	Direct fire suppression efforts will be ineffective. Firefighters retreat to existing roads, streams and other barriers and attempt to burn out fuels between the fireline and the advancing fire front.

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As the number of people living in and adjacent to wildlands grows, the likelihood of homes being threatened by wildfire also grows. A critical factor in determining whether or not a home will survive a wildfire is the type, amount, and maintenance of vegetation surrounding the house. In the 1980’s, the term “defensible space” was coined to describe vegetation management practices aimed at reducing the wildfire threat to homes.

WHAT IS DEFENSIBLE SPACE?

Defensible space refers to that area between a house and an oncoming wildfire where the vegetation has been modified to reduce the wildfire threat and to provide an opportunity for firefighters to effectively defend a home. Sometimes, a defensible space is simply a homeowner’s properly maintained backyard.