



Fuelbreak Guidelines for Forested Subdivisions & Communities

By

Frank C. Dennis



Knowledge to Go Places

This publication was developed for use by foresters, planners, developers, homeowners' associations and others. Implementation of these measures cannot *guarantee* safety from all wildfires, but will greatly increase the probability of containing them at more manageable levels.



Inadequate fire planning can result in loss of life or property and costly suppression activities.



Colorado's forested lands are experiencing severe impacts from continuing population increases and peoples' desire to escape urban pressures. Subdivisions and developments are opening new areas for homesite construction at an alarming rate, especially along the Front Range and around recreational areas such as Dillon, Vail, and Steamboat Springs.

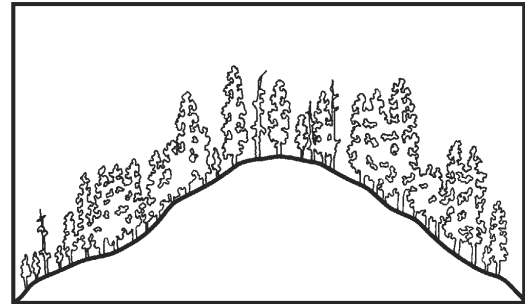
But with development inevitably comes a higher risk of wildfire as well as an ever-increasing potential for loss of life and property. Methods of fire suppression, pre-suppression needs, and homeowner and fire crew safety must all be considered in the planning and review of new developments as well as for the "retrofitting" of existing, older subdivisions.

Fuelbreaks should be considered in fire management planning for subdivisions and developments; however, the following are guidelines **only**. They should be customized to local areas by professional foresters experienced in Rocky Mountain wildfire behavior and suppression tactics.

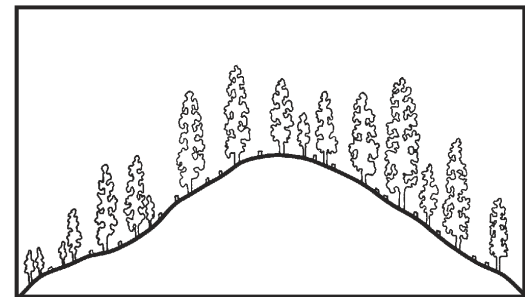
Fuelbreak vs Firebreak

Although the term fuelbreak is widely used in Colorado, it is often confused with firebreak. The two are entirely separate, and aesthetically different, forms of forest fuel modification and treatment.

- A firebreak is strip of land, 20 to 30 feet wide (or more), in which all vegetation is removed down to bare, mineral soil each year prior to fire season.



Above, cross section of mixed conifer stand before fuelbreak modification. Below, after modification.



- A fuelbreak (or shaded fuelbreak) is an easily accessible strip of land of varying width (depending on fuel and terrain), in which fuel density is reduced, thus improving fire control opportunities. The stand is thinned, and remaining trees are pruned to remove ladder fuels. Brush, heavy ground fuels, snags, and dead trees are disposed of and an open, park-like appearance is established.

The following is a discussion of the uses, limitations, and specifications of fuelbreaks in wildfire control and fuels management.

Fuelbreak Limitations

Fuelbreaks provide quick access for wildfire suppression. Control activities can be conducted more safely due to low fuel volumes. Strategically located, they break up large, continuous tracts of dense timber, thus limiting uncontrolled spread of wildfire.

Fuelbreaks can aid firefighters greatly by slowing fire spread under normal burning conditions. However, under extreme conditions, even the best fuelbreaks stand little chance of arresting a large



Before and after photos of a forest stand thinned to reduce fuel loads.

fire, regardless of firefighting efforts. Such fires, in a phenomenon called “spotting,” can drop firebrands 1/8-mile or more ahead of the main fire, causing very rapid fire spread. These types of large fires may continue until there is a major change in weather conditions, topography, or fuel type.

It is critical to understand: A fuelbreak is the line of defense. The area (including any homes and developments) between it and the fire may remain vulnerable.

In spite of these somewhat gloomy limitations, fuelbreaks have proven themselves effective in Colorado. During the 1980 Crystal Lakes Subdivision Fire near Fort Collins, crown fires were stopped in areas with fuelbreak thinnings, while other areas of dense lodgepole pine burned completely. A fire at O’Fallon Park in Jefferson County was successfully stopped and controlled at a fuelbreak. The Buffalo Creek Fire in Jefferson County (1996) and the High Meadow Fire in Park and Jefferson Counties (2000) slowed dramatically wherever intense forest thinnings had been completed. During the 2002 Hayman Fire, Denver Water’s entire complex of offices, shops and caretakers’ homes at Cheesman Reservoir were saved by a fuelbreak with no firefighting intervention by a fuelbreak.



Burned area near Cheesman Reservoir as a result of the Hayman Fire. Note the unburned green trees in the middle right of the photo, a treated fuelbreak.

The Need For A Fuelbreak

Several factors determine the need for fuelbreaks in forested subdivisions, including: (1) potential problem indicators; (2) wildfire hazard areas; (3) slope; (4) topography; (5) crowning potential; and (6) ignition sources.

Potential Problem Indicator

The table below explains potential problem indicators for various hazards and characteristics common to Colorado’s forest types. All major forest types, except aspen, indicate a high potential for wildfire hazard.

Fuel Type	Characteristics			Hazards			
	Aesthetics	Wildlife	Soil	Wildfire	Avalanche	Flood	Climate
Aspen	2	3	3	2	4	3	2
Douglas-fir	2	2	3	5	2	2	3
Greasewood-Saltbrush	4	2	2	2	1	3	3
Limber-Bristlecone Pine	3	2	4	3	4	2	5
Lodgepole Pine	2	2	3	5	4	2	4
Meadow	5	4	4	2	3	4	3
Mixed Conifer	2	1	1	5	3	1	3
Mountain Grassland	5	3	4	3	3	2	4
Mountain Shrub	3	5	4	4	2	2	3
Piñon-Juniper	2	3	4	4	2	3	2
Ponderosa Pine	2	3	1	5	2	2	3
Sagebrush	4	4	3	3	3	2	3
Spruce-Fir	2	3	3	4	5	3	4

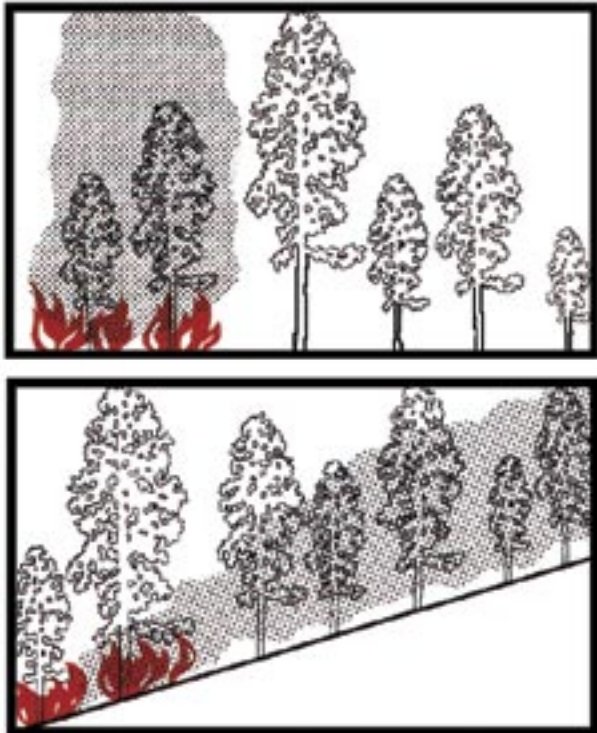
Legend: 5 – Problem may be crucial; 4 – Problem very likely; 3 – Exercise caution; 2 – Problem usually limited; 1 – No rating possible

Wildfire Hazard Maps

The Colorado State Forest Service (CSFS), numerous counties and some National Forests have completed wildfire hazard mapping for many areas within Colorado, particularly along the Front Range. These maps typically consider areas with 30 percent or greater slope; hazardous fuel types; and hazardous topographic features such as fire chimneys. Wildfire Hazard Ratings may be depicted in several ways. Whatever system is used, areas rated moderate or higher should be considered for fuel modification work.

Slope

Rate of fire spread increases as the slope of the land increases. Fuels are preheated by the rising smoke column or they may even come into contact with the flames themselves.



Fire effects, flat vs steep terrain. Note preheating of fuels on steep ground from passage of smoke column.

At 30 percent slope, rate of fire spread doubles compared to rates at level ground, drastically reducing firefighting effectiveness. **Areas near 30 percent or greater slopes are critical and must be reviewed carefully.**

Topography

Certain topographic features influence fire spread and should be evaluated. Included are fire chimneys, saddles, and V-shaped canyons. They are usually recognized by reviewing standard U.S.G.S. quad maps.

- Chimneys are densely vegetated drainages on slopes greater than 30 percent. Wind, as well as air pre-heated by a fire, tends to funnel up these drainages, rapidly spreading fire upslope.



Chimney.

- Saddles are low points along a main ridge or between two high points. Like chimneys, they also funnel winds to create a natural fire path during a fire's uphill run. Saddles act as corridors to spread fire into adjacent valleys or drainages.



Saddle.

- Narrow, V-shaped valleys or canyons can ignite easily due to heat radiating from one side to the other. For example, a fire burning on one side of a narrow valley dries and preheats fuels on the opposite side until the fire "flashes over." The natural effect of slope on fire then takes over and fire spreads rapidly up drainage and uphill along both sides of the valley.



Flashover in V-shaped valley.

Crowning Potential

An on-site visit is required to accurately assess crowning potential. A key, below, helps determine this rating. Fuel modification is usually unnecessary if an area has a rating of 3 or less.

Crowning Potential Key

	Rating
A. Foliage present, trees living or dead — B	
B. Foliage living — C	
C. Leaves deciduous or, if evergreen, usually soft, pliant, and moist; never oily, waxy, or resinous.	0
CC. Leaves evergreen, not as above — D	
D. Foliage resinous, waxy, or oily — E	
E. Foliage dense — F	
F. Ladder fuels plentiful — G	
G. Crown closure > 75 percent	9
GG. Crown closure < 75 percent	7
FF. Ladder fuels sparse or absent — H	
H. Crown closure > 75 percent	7
HH. Crown closure < 75 percent	5
EE. Foliage open — I	
I. Ladder fuel plentiful	4
II. Ladder fuel sparse or absent	2
DD. Foliage not resinous, waxy, or oily — J	
J. Foliage dense — K	
K. Ladder fuels plentiful — L	
L. Crown closure > 75 percent	7
LL. Crown closure < 75 percent	4
KK. Ladder fuels sparse or absent — M	
M. Crown closure > 75 percent	5
MM. Crown closure < 75 percent	3
JJ. Foliage open — N	
N. Ladder fuels plentiful	3
NN. Ladder fuels sparse or absent	1
BB. Foliage dead	0

The majority of dead trees within the fuelbreak should be removed. Occasionally, large, dead trees (14 inches or larger in diameter at 4 1/2 feet above ground level) may be retained as wildlife trees. If retained, all ladder fuels must be cleared from around the tree's trunk.

Ignition Sources

Possible ignition sources, which may threaten planned or existing developments, must be investigated thoroughly. Included are other developments and homes, major roads, recreation sites, railroads, and other possible sources. These might be distant from the proposed development,

yet still able to channel fire into the area due to slope, continuous fuels, or other topographic features.

Fuelbreak Locations

In fire suppression, an effective fire line is connected, or "anchored," to natural or artificial fire barriers. Such anchor points might be rivers, creeks, large rock outcrops, wet meadows, or a less flammable timber type such as aspen. Similarly, properly designed and constructed fuelbreaks take advantage of these same barriers to eliminate "fuel bridges." (Fire often escapes control because of fuel bridges that carry the fire across control lines.)

Since fuelbreaks should normally provide quick, safer access to defensive positions, they are necessarily linked with road systems. Connected with county-specified roads within subdivisions, they provide good access and defensive positions for firefighting equipment and support vehicles. Cut-and fill slopes of roads are an integral part of a fuelbreak as they add to the effective width of modified fuels.

Fuelbreaks without an associated road system, such as those located along strategic ridge lines, are still useful in fire suppression. Here, they are often strengthened and held using aerial retardant drops until fire crews can walk in or be ferried in by helicopter.

Preferably, fuelbreaks are located along ridge tops to help arrest fires at the end of their runs. However, due to homesite locations and resource values, they can also be effective when established at the base of slopes. Mid-slope fuelbreaks are least desirable, but under certain circumstances and with modifications, these too, may be valuable.

Fuelbreaks are located so that the area under management is broken into small, manageable units. Thus, when a wildfire reaches modified fuels, defensive action is more easily taken, helping to keep the fire small. For example, a plan for a subdivision might recommend that fuelbreaks break up continuous forest fuels into units of 10 acres or less. This is an excellent plan, especially if defensible space thinning is completed around homes and structures, and thinning for forest management and forest health are combined with the fuelbreak.

When located along ridge tops, continuous length as well as width are critical elements. Extensive long-range planning is essential in positioning these types of fuelbreaks.

Aesthetics

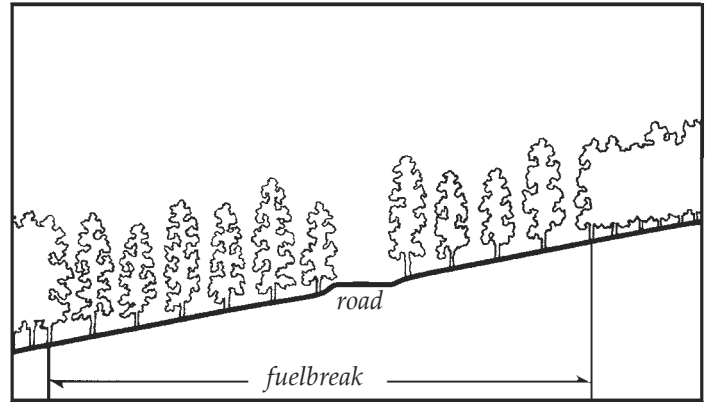
Improperly planned fuelbreaks can adversely impact an area's aesthetic qualities. Careful construction is necessary when combining mid-slope fuelbreaks with roads involving excessive cut-and-fill.



These photos, far- and near- views of the same site, illustrate that forest can be thinned without impacting aesthetics.

Care must also be taken in areas that are not thinned throughout for fuel hazard reduction. In such cases the fuelbreak visually sticks out like a "sore thumb" due to contrasting thinned and unthinned portions of the forest. (Especially noticeable are those portions of the fuelbreak above road cuts).

These guidelines are designed to minimize aesthetic impacts. However, some situations may require extensive thinning and, thus, result in a major visual change to an area. Additional thinning beyond the fuelbreak may be necessary to create an irregular edge and to "feather," or blend, the fuelbreak thinning into the unthinned portions of the forest. Any thinning beyond the fuelbreak improves its effectiveness and is highly recommended.



Cross-section of a typical fuelbreak built in conjunction with a road.

Constructing the Fuelbreak

Fuelbreak Width and Slope Adjustments

Note: Since road systems are so important to fuelbreak construction, the following measurements are from the toe of the fill for downslope distances, and above the edge of the cut for uphill distances.

The minimum recommended fuelbreak width is approximately 300 feet for level ground. Since fire activity intensifies as slope increases, the overall fuelbreak width must also increase. However, to minimize aesthetic impacts and to maximize fire crew safety, the majority of the increases should be made at the bottom of the fuelbreak, below the road cut.

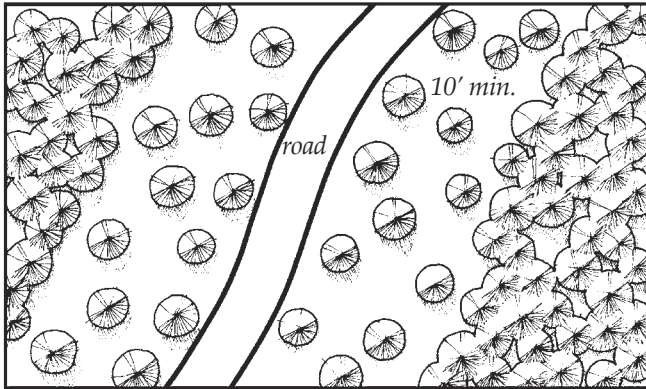
Widths are also increased when severe topographic conditions are encountered. Guidelines for fuelbreak widths on slopes are given below:

Fuelbreak Width/Slope			
Percent Slope (%)	Minimum Uphill Distance (ft)	Minimum Downhill Distance (ft)	Total Width of Modified fuels (ft)*
0	150	150	300
10	140	165	303
20	130	180	310
30	120	195	315
40	110	210	320
50	100	225	325
60	100	240	340

*As slope increases, total distance for cut-and-fill for road construction rapidly increases, improving fuelbreak effective width.

Stand Densities

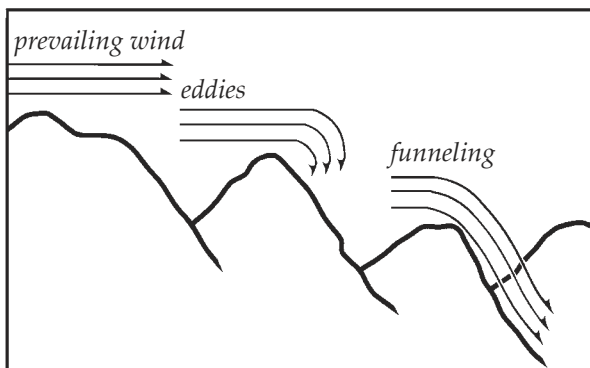
Crown separation is a more critical factor for fuelbreaks than a fixed tree density level. A *minimum* 10-foot spacing between the edges of tree crowns is recommended on level ground. As slope increases, crown spacing should also increase. However, small, isolated groups of trees may be retained for visual diversity. Increase crown spacing around any groups of trees left for aesthetic reasons and to reduce fire intensities and torching potential.



Plan view of fuelbreak showing minimum distance between tree crowns.

In technical terms, a fuelbreak thinning is classified as a heavy "sanitation and improvement cut, from below." Within fuelbreaks, trees that are suppressed, diseased, deformed, damaged, or of low vigor are removed along with all ladder fuels. Remaining trees are the largest, healthiest, most wind-firm trees from the dominant and co-dominant species of the stand.

Because such a thinning is quite heavy for an initial entry into a stand, prevailing winds, eddy effects, and wind funneling must be carefully evaluated to minimize the possibility of windthrow. It may be necessary to develop the fuelbreak over several years to allow the timber stand to "firm-up" — this especially applies to lodgepole pine and Engelmann spruce stands.



Topography affects wind behavior — an important consideration during fuelbreak construction.

Area-wide forest thinnings are recommended for any subdivisions. Such thinning is not as severe as a fuelbreak thinning, but generally should be completed to fuelbreak specifications along the roads (as outlined on page 6.) In addition, "defensible space thinnings" are highly recommended around all structures (see CSU Coop. Extension Fact sheet 6.302, *Creating Wildfire-Defensible Zones*).

Debris Removal

Limbs and branches left from thinning (slash) can add significant volumes of fuel to the forest floor, especially in lodgepole pine, mixed-conifer, or spruce/fir timber types. These materials can accumulate and serve as ladder fuels, or can become "jackpots," increasing the difficulty of defending the fuelbreak during a wildfire. **Slash decomposes very slowly in Colorado and proper disposal is essential.** Proper treatment reduces fire hazard, improves access for humans and livestock, encourages establishment of grasses and other vegetation, and improves aesthetics.

Three treatment methods are commonly used. These are lopping-and-scattering, piling and burning, and chipping. Mulching of small trees and slash using equipment similar to Hydro-axes or Timbcos equipped with mulching heads are becoming a popular method of treatment. Size, amount, and location of slash dictates the method used, in addition to cost and the final desired appearance. The method chosen will also depend on how soon an effective fuelbreak is needed prior to construction in new developments.



Lop and scatter: slash should be no deeper than 12" above ground surface.



Chipping is the most desirable, but also the most expensive method of slash disposal.



Piled slash can be burned but only during certain conditions, such as after a snowfall.

Fuelbreak Maintenance

Following initial thinning, trees continue to grow (usually at a faster rate). The increased light on the forest floor encourages heavy grass and brush growth where, in many cases, where little grew before. The site disturbance and exposed mineral soil created during fuelbreak development is a perfect seed bed for new trees that, in turn, create new ladder fuels. Thus, in the absence of maintenance, fuelbreak effectiveness will decrease over time.



Fuelbreak maintenance is essential. Ingrowth, shown above, will minimize the effectiveness of this fuelbreak within a few years.

Fuelbreak maintenance problems are most often the result of time and neglect. Misplaced records, lack of follow-up and funding, and apathy caused by a lack of fire events are some of the major obstacles. In addition, the responsibility for fuelbreak maintenance projects is often unclear. For example, control of a fuelbreak completed by a developer passes to a homeowner's association, usually with limited funds and authority to maintain fuelbreaks.

If fuelbreak maintenance is not planned and completed as scheduled, consider carefully whether the fuelbreak should be constructed. An un-maintained fuelbreak may lead to a false sense of security among residents and fire suppression personnel.

Conclusion

An image of well-designed communities for Colorado includes:

- Forested subdivisions where the total forest cover is well-managed through carefully planned, designed, and maintained thinnings. This contributes to reduced wildfire hazards and a much healthier forest — one that is more resistant to insects and disease.
- A system of roads and driveways with their associated fuelbreaks that break up the continuity of the forest cover and fuels. These help keep fires small, while also providing safer locations from which to mount fire suppression activities. In addition to allowing fire personnel in, they will allow residents to evacuate if necessary.
- Individual homes that all have defensible space around them, making them much easier to defend and protect from wildfire, while also protecting the surrounding forest from structure fires.

Creation of such communities is entirely feasible if recognition of the fire risks, a spirit of cooperation, an attitude of shared responsibility, and the political will exists.

*Colorado's mountains comprise diverse slopes, fuel types, aspects, and topographic features. This variety makes it impossible to develop general fuelbreak prescriptions for all locations. **The previous recommendations are guidelines only.** A professional forester with fire suppression expertise should be consulted to "customize" fuelbreaks for particular areas.*