

# Defensible Space in the News: Public Discussion of a Neglected Topic

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## Introduction

This study examined how wildfire management issues are covered in the news media. In this paper we discuss one aspect of the research—how defensible space has been portrayed—and report two key findings and opportunities we identified.

## Key Findings

**Defensible space is only a small part of the wildfire discussion in the media,** which is dominated by large spikes in coverage on firefighting that occur during major fires. This poses challenges and opportunities for managers interested in communicating about defensible space. When a wildfire is burning, educational information about defensible space may be overshadowed by reports of the disaster of the wildfire and the heroics of firefighters. But the huge peaks in media coverage that occur at this time also represent an opportunity to communicate messages about defensible space. With headlines focusing people's attention on wildfire, fire mitigation will be a more salient issue, making homeowners more open to new ideas. This may be an opportune time to present information on the full range of defensible space actions that can be taken. For example, a story about a homeowner whose house was saved by defensible space could be placed beside news coverage showing homes destroyed by fire.

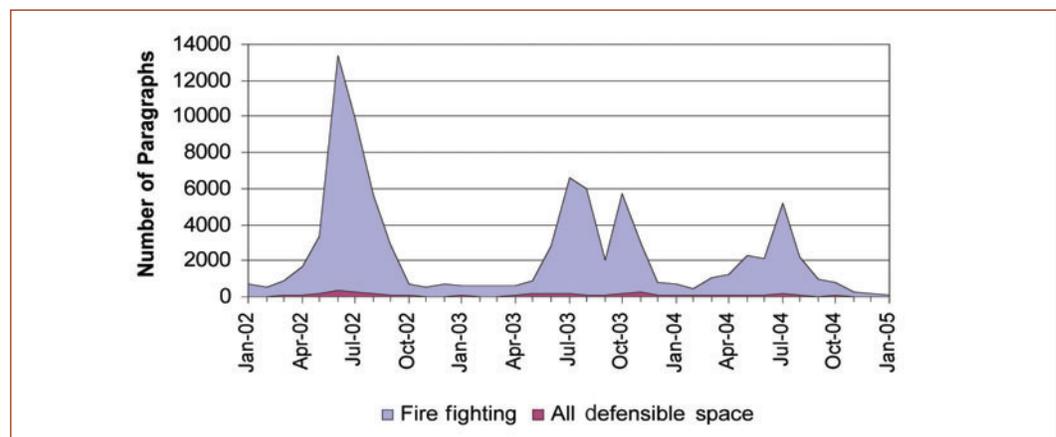
**Coverage of defensible space focuses on clearing vegetation.** To encourage a comprehensive understanding of defensible space concepts, managers may want to work with the media to expand their discussion of defensible space beyond vegetation management. Many property owners may be reluctant to clear vegetation around all sides of their homes if that conflicts with deeply held values about living deep in the woods (e.g., Nelson *et al.* 2004). The manager's challenge is to encourage a more complex and complete discussion of defensible space.

## Detailed Findings

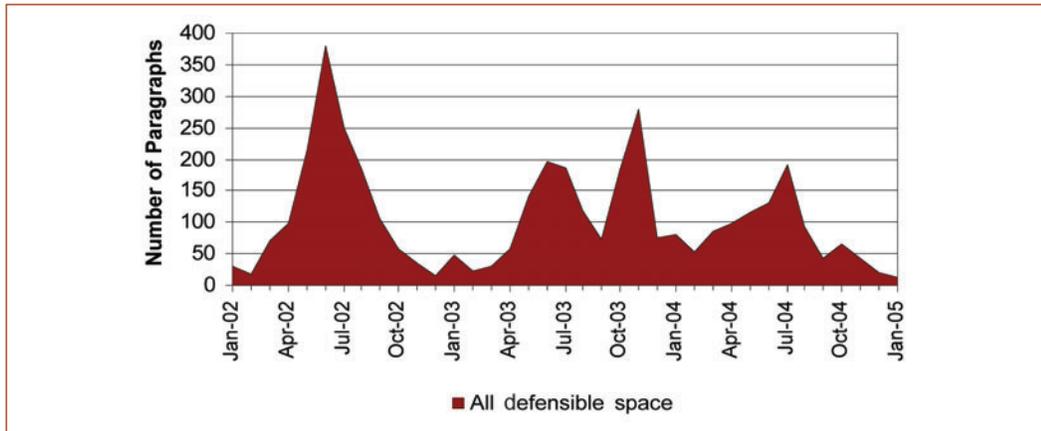
News media coverage of wildfire and other natural disasters often focuses on immediate and dramatic events, rather than on the broader context in which they occur (Smith 1992). Wildfire and dramatic accounts of fighting fires attract significant media attention. On occasion, the media have been accused of giving exaggerated or inaccurate accounts of fires and other natural disasters (e.g., Reid 1989, Smith 1992). Not surprisingly, we found that news media discussion of wildfire is dominated by coverage of firefighting, and defensible space is a small fraction of total wildfire-related coverage. Over the 3 years examined in this study, defensible space accounted for only 4 percent of the news media discussion on wildfire (3,899 paragraphs on defensible space vs. 88,906 on firefighting). News media discussion of defensible space was barely visible when plotted on the same graph as firefighting (fig. 1). This figure also shows the dramatic peaks in media coverage of wildfire that corresponded to major fires. Peaks occurred in June 2002, July-August 2003, October 2003, and July 2004.

Figure 2 shows the volume of news media discussion of defensible space plotted alone. When viewed at this scale and compared with figure 1, media discussion of defensible space clearly follows the peaks and valleys of firefighting discussion. This makes sense when we consider that the imminent threat of wildfire encourages coverage for property owners about steps they could take to protect their property. That defensible space coverage is highest during fires is not necessarily a negative because this is when questions of how to mitigate fire risk are most salient and when homeowners are more likely to be receptive to the information. However, managers may want to consider working to ensure that defensible space issues are highlighted throughout the year because research on other natural hazards has found that information provided during this “window of opportunity” is more likely to have a positive response when people are already aware of the problem and possible solutions (Monroe *et al.* 2005).

**Figure 1.—News media discussion of firefighting and defensible space, January 2002 through January 2005**



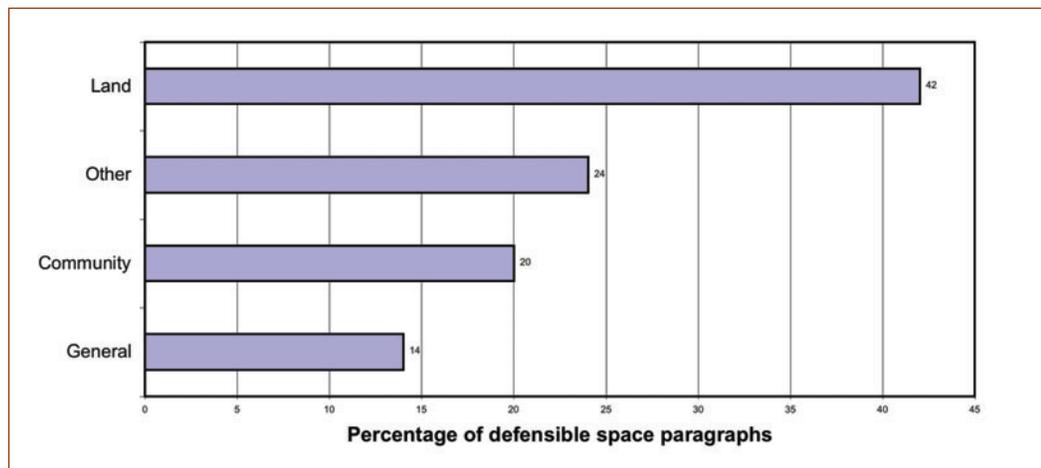
**Figure 2.—News media discussion of defensible space, January 2002 through January 2005**



To look at more in-depth coverage of defensible space concepts, we categorized actions as either land treatments (such as clearing, thinning, or trimming vegetation around a structure) or “other” treatments (such as using fire-resistant building materials, chimney spark arresters, or moving woodpiles away from structures). We also counted the number of paragraphs with just a general reference to defensible space (e.g., firewise or fire safe), and community-level defensible space actions (e.g., clearing brush or thinning forested areas in a community).

As shown in figure 3, there was almost twice as much media discussion of land treatments for defensible space as “other” actions (42 percent, compared to 24 percent). If general reference to defensible space (e.g., firewise) is perceived as primarily land treatments, the amount of defensible space discussion

**Figure 3.—Percentage of defensible space concepts in all defensible space news media discussion, January 2002 through January 2005**



devoted to land treatments was even higher, suggesting the main message being conveyed to the public was that implementing defensible space primarily meant clearing vegetation around one's home.

Community-level defensible space was mentioned infrequently. Only 20 percent of all defensible space references mentioned defensible space around a community.

## **Background Information**

News media are the most important source of information for most people about a wide range of natural resource and environmental issues (e.g., Atwater *et al.* 1985; Fortner *et al.* 1991, Ostman and Parker 1987, Wilson 1995). For example, the top source of information about Federal forest management for residents of Oregon's Central Cascades was newspapers, followed by television, radio, magazines/books, friends/relatives, interest groups, and natural resource agencies (Shindler *et al.* 1996). For most people, these information sources play an important role in public discussions of policy issues and have been shown to both shape and reflect how the public views and understands a wide range of issues. In addition, analysis of the news media has been successfully used to indirectly measure public attitudes and opinions related to many topics (e.g., Fan 1997, Fan and Cook 2003).

While the vast majority of media coverage of wildfire is devoted to firefighting and destruction, this study examined the extent of coverage devoted to defensible space. We also looked at the complexity of news media discussion of defensible space by analyzing specific actions discussed. The defensible space study is part of a larger project examining news media discussion of wildfire and risk mitigation, focused on ecological facets of wildfire coverage, problems and costs associated with wildfire, and public land treatments (e.g., thinning and prescribed burning).

## **Methods**

The study methodology involved five steps. First, we downloaded news stories about wildfire from an online commercial database. Newspapers we accessed ranged from national papers such as the New York Times, to regional papers such as the Arizona Republic, to more local papers such as the Monterey County Herald. Approximately 77,000 stories from more than 200 newspapers, newswires, television and radio news transcripts, and news magazines were downloaded, covering the period January 1, 2002, through January 31, 2005. Second, we examined a random sample of the downloaded news stories to determine whether or not they were "on topic." Virtually all of the stories were in fact about wildfire. Third, we identified the main ideas about defensible space (from Firewise 2005, Cohen 2000, and others) expressed in the database of news stories. Fourth, we developed a computer algorithm to score paragraphs in the database for defensible space concepts, using the InfoTrend™ computer content

analysis method and software.<sup>1</sup> Finally, we assessed the accuracy of the computer scoring by examining a random sample of the stories that had been coded by our computer instructions.

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<sup>1</sup> See Fan (1997) or Fan and Cook (2003) for a description of the InfoTrend computer content analysis method. Contact the authors for more detail about the methodology and data used in this study.

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