

Thinning to meet Colorado State Forest Service Defensible Space Mitigation Standards

- Wildfires will follow the path of least resistance, aka, densest areas of vegetation. Most pinyon-juniper (PJ) forests are composed of continuous fuel; there are no spaces or openings within the tree canopy, there are minimal natural breaks that would slow a fire down.
- We do not have the ability to stop a wildfire; we are trying to manipulate the direction of the fire with our thinning/management actions. We are trying to have the fire move around the area of work/thinning.
- Creating a defensible space does not guarantee that your home will survive a wildfire. It simply creates a space where firefighters may be able to safely conduct firefighting actions or a zone where the fire does not have direct access to your structures.
- The goal of thinning is to create a mosaic pattern within the trees to break up the continuity of the fuel.
- Our goal with thinning is to make the fire work to get from tree clump to tree clump.
- A mosaic pattern is a clump of trees varying between 2 to 5 trees. The size of the clump depends of the size, health, and location of the trees. Location can refer to the amount of slope and distance from any structures. The minimum space between individual trees is 15 feet and the amount of space should increase with larger clumps and/or larger trees. The space will also increase if the slope where the clump is growing on becomes steeper.
- A mosaic pattern does NOT have to be one tree, space, one tree, space, etc. (like a checker board of trees).
- A clump of 2-5 trees will have more space between clumps than the space between individual trees.
- Tree spacing is from the tips of the tree's branches at the widest part of the tree. There should be 15+ feet between tips of the tree branches between clumps. Spacing is NOT from the tree trunk or top of the tree.
- Wildfire in western Colorado is dependent on wind. No wind = the fire will have limited movement. With wind, the fire will be pushed across the landscape until the wind dies down or changes direction.
- Slope has a strong effect on wildfire, fire moves uphill much faster than on flat ground or downhill. This is because the heat of the fire pre-heats the vegetation up slope and dries it out making it more combustible.
- Tree pruning is not as important in PJ forests as in fir, pine, or spruce forests. Pruning trees that are only 10 feet tall can make for funny looking trees. The more important factor in PJ is tree spacing where the fire has to 'work' to move from tree clump to tree clump and removing any shrubs beneath the tree crown.
- Pruning should be done to remove dead branches or branches that are touching/growing towards the ground.
- Removing shrubs that are growing beneath PJ trees is highly recommended, this reduces the overall fuel load that is available to the fire. Shrubs are great in open areas.
- It is NOT recommended to prune live branches, or remove pinyon or juniper trees between April and October. The Pinyon Ips bark beetle is active in western Colorado. Any thinning activity that starts the flow of sap in the summer months can attract the bark beetle to your property. It is OK to remove dead trees and dead branches at any time during the year.
- More information on the Ips beetles can be found on Fact Sheet No. 5.558 located on the Colorado State University Extension website, www.ext.colostate.edu