

More homes are in the line of fire, but whose responsibility are they?

Nathanael Massey, *Environment & Energy Publishing*, 5-22-14

With everyone from the Forest Service to the governor of California warning of increasingly severe wildfires, one might think residents of Western wildlands would be pulling up stakes and moving to safety.

The assumption would be wrong.

Climate change and development are on a collision course with housing development in fire-prone regions accelerating even as warmer, drier temperatures push the West's fire regimes into uncharted territory. Both trends have put increased pressure on federal and local firefighters and, by extension, the resources of the organizations behind them.

With the problem growing more acute by the year, some firefighters and forest managers have begun to question what, if any, responsibility they bear for structures built in fire-prone regions. While the first job of any firefighter is to protect human life, they say, the same considerations don't necessarily apply to human property.

Ultimately, responsibility for homes built in or near lands prone to wildfires -- known as the wildland-urban interface, or WUI -- should begin and end with the people who build them, said Sonny Stiger, a retired fire and fuels specialist with the Forest Service who now serves a board member with the group FireSafe Montana.

"We need people on the local level to start shouldering a larger share of the burden," he said. That means residents of the WUI need to ensure that their homes are as fire-safe as possible, he said -- and not to expect that fire crews will necessarily swoop in to the rescue.

There are many steps that individual homeowners in the WUI can take to defend their homes from fire, including clearing brush from their property, replacing flammable building materials and creating buffer zones between themselves and the forest around them. But other than educational outreach programs, the federal government has little ability to sway -- and no ability to enforce -- compliance with such measures.

At the same time, it's federal and state taxpayers who shoulder the majority of the costs when fire comes to call.

A fundamental disconnect?

Federal agencies spend roughly \$3 billion a year battling wildfires, while land-use decisions -- where individuals choose to build a home -- are made at the local level, said Ray Rasker, executive director of the nonprofit group Headwaters Economics.

"The decisions made at the local level are not tied to the consequences of those decision," he said.

As a result, the cost of fighting wildfires in the WUI is climbing. Currently, about 17 percent of the wildland-urban interface is actually developed. But previous research by Headwaters Economics found that, should that figure climb to 50 percent, fighting fires in the wildland-urban interface would overwhelm the Forest Service's budget.

Already, federal agencies are pushing back, making it clear that defending homes lies outside of their primary mandate. Interagency guidelines for 2014 state that, while the mission of wildland firefighters does not preclude them from working in the WUI, that action should be limited to controlling fire spread.

"Fire suppression actions on structures that are outside federal jurisdiction ... are not appropriate roles for the Forest Service," notes the 2014 edition of the Interagency Standards for Fire and Fire Aviation Operations.

As federal agencies have pushed back, more of the burden of defending private structures has fallen on local -- often volunteer -- fire crews. But for a handful of counties in Montana, even that is changing.

'No home is worth a life'

Last December, county commissioners in Lewis and Clark County, Mont., passed a resolution declaring that county firefighters are not obligated to save homes in the WUI.

The measure is primarily aimed at protecting firefighters, said Stiger, who helped to author the resolution. It originally came about in response to the deaths of 19 hotshot firefighters in the Yarnell Hill fire last year, he said.

But it also aims to wake up homeowners to their own responsibilities, he added.

"Once [homeowners] realize what this really means, they're not going to look out the window and expect a fire truck in the driveway when there's a fire on their doorstep," he said. "It's up to them to make their homes fire-safe ahead of time. The job of fire crews is to secure the fire in the fastest, safest way possible -- no home is worth the life of a fireman."

Rasker argues for a more nuanced approach to shifting responsibility to the local level. While the federal government can't dictate where people build their houses, he said, it can shift a higher portion of the firefighting costs to the point where land-use decisions are made.

"The thing that nobody's tried yet is policies to direct future buildings away from the most dangerous places," he said. An incentive program that allows developers to build at higher densities as long as they're doing so in defensible space would be one example, he said.

"As long as firefighting is treated like something that you just keep throwing money at, nothing's going to change," he said. "If you can get a county commissioner to look at a subdivision map and think about how he's going to shoulder his share of firefighting costs, that shifts the calculus."