

Time to re-think our approach



Dan Bailey

As another year draws to a close, we again have suffered more civilian and fire-fighter fatalities, more lost homes and structures, and continued skyrocketing costs. Why are we not making headway in dealing with this growing crisis?

Homeowners, government officials and other organizations trying to resolve the issue of wildland-urban interface fire must stop, re-group and recognize that it is definitely time to take a new look and find fresh approaches to dealing with this problem. There are a multitude of fragmented WUI programs that are not well-coordinated. Many critics are simply calling this situation embarrassing, and are asking the simple question, "Why can't we get all the players to the table to talk and work together on this issue?"

Clearly, people and their property need protection from wildfire, which is the one fact upon which everyone can agree. But should this be the responsibility of the federal government through the Forest Service and the Department of Interior? Who should pay for this protection? Should homeowners living in the WUI do more to protect themselves from wildfire? They must learn to make better decisions about where and how to develop property, build homes and communities and to retrofit existing homes to be more firesafe.

There is also an enormous problem in current fire-protection infrastructure, such as roads and water-delivery systems. In most cases existing systems are inadequate for property and resource protection during fast-moving wildfires. The cost of improving the existing infrastructure, however, would be staggering — some estimate hundreds of billions of dollars. During major fire operations in the interface, most structure losses occur in the first few hours of an incident. This often is due to a lack of effective vegetation-management practices. These losses will continue until appropriate access, landscaping and construction standards are implemented and enforced.

Not everyone is smart enough not to build in harm's way, which reinforces the need zoning as well as building, fire and interface codes and better public education.

We will never get a true handle on firefighting danger — much less firefighting costs — if we consent to residential development sprawling throughout the wildland-urban interface. Three

acres per minute of conversion of wildlands to home-sites is just not acceptable to the majority of Americans. But what can we do?

As a homeowner, you can start by determining if live in a wildfire-prone area. Check with your local fire department or state forestry department to find out. They also can help direct you toward any local groups or associations that are working on the wildland fire problems that would value your participation.

For both homeowners and local governments, having a community wildfire protection plan is a big start. The best approach is blending all planning efforts together, a requirement by many county officials across the country. Consider zoning and/or building and fire codes, or better yet implementing a wildland-urban interface code in your community. Many communities throughout the U.S. and around the globe have done this and it is working well.

Another way involves factoring wildfire danger into subdivision review, something proposed by numerous state legislators this year in the U.S.

The insurance and mortgage industries could play a role, too. If more of the risks of building on wildfire-prone areas were borne by property owners, their bankers and their insurers — rather than by taxpayers — we'd likely see changes in development patterns.

If WUI residents relied on their local fire department to protect their homes and lives, leaving the Forest Service, Department of Interior, and state forestry organizations to tend to the federal and state lands, we'd see a dramatic change. If that were the case, property taxes for rural fire departments would soar to cover the full wildland firefighting costs, including much of what the federal government pays for now. The traditional approach to firefighting, in which the Forest Service (and other federal agencies) throw everything they've got at fires to protect houses and the people in them, socializes the costs.

The landowners enjoy all the benefits of their homes in the wildlands, but the rest of us share the expense. Time to rethink how we are approaching this issue.

All of this is helping in fight the battle, but many are saying it is not enough to win the war.

Dan W. Bailey



Contact the IAWF
International Assn. of
Wildland Fire
1418 Washburn St.
Missoula, MT 59801
ph: 406-531-8264
execdir@iawfonline.org
To join the IAWF, visit
www.iawfonline.org