

OPINION

The true costs of living in the forest

By Lloyd Burton

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The Mountain West is in the line of fire. This is hardly news to those of us who live here, nor are the reasons: record droughts and high temperatures, and dead and dying forests denied their annual disease killing and cleansing ground fires. We also have record numbers of people moving into the wildland-urban interface (WUI) intermingled with public lands. Fires starting in the WUI tend to be human-caused.

My students and I learned that states in our region take one of three approaches to get WUI residents to limit wildfire devastation on their property and in their communities:

- Common-standard states (California and Oregon) mandate mitigation measures (fire-proofing structures and creating defensible space) for everyone living in the WUI.
- Local-option states (Arizona, Colorado and New Mexico) have no statewide standards, and authorize but don't require local governments to adopt their own mitigation regulations.
- Hybrid states (Nevada and Utah) have statewide voluntary standards.

In local-option states like ours, we think of WUI wildfires as a problem for those living there. But as a Western WUI resident for most of my life, I know this is not really true. Whenever and wherever a big WUI wildfire blows up, we all pay. We pay to put it out. Sometimes the best and bravest of our wildland firefighters — whom we put in harm's way — pay with their lives. We pay with fire-ravaged watersheds that pollute drinking water reservoirs with mudslides, carrying burned slash laden with tons of fire retardants whose long-term environmental effects we still don't understand.

Worse, we pay with the morale of courageous public servants. A WUI wildfire incident commander in one of my classes told me his crews once spent days battling a big fire in the Colorado WUI at some risk to themselves, and saved some unmitigated mountain-top homes that otherwise would have been lost.

Standing at one of these sites with a couple whose home his firefighters had preserved, the woman told him, "I can't find words to express the depth of my gratitude for your having spared our home and all its precious memories."

But the man was bitter. Looking out over the burned landscape, he said disgustedly, "You should have let it burn. At least then I could have collected the insurance. Now I get to live on the moon."

"Let it burn?" my student asked himself. "Maybe next time I will." He has since left wildland firefighting, in part, he said, because we live in a state where we ask nothing of WUI residents and everything of our firefighters.

I've had owners of second homes in unregulated WUI jurisdictions tell me they'd rather lose their property to fire than thin their trees or remove shrubs. So if half the members of a community mitigate and the other half don't, the whole community still goes up in flames. And it's worse at bigger scales, as when one high country county mandates wildfire mitigation and the adjoining ones don't; or if the U.S. Forest Service thins undergrowth and dead trees at forest borders but neighboring mountain communities won't.

In truth, all of us in Colorado co-habit a commons. We think in terms of individual land parcels and local political jurisdictions, but fire does not.

In local-option states like ours, we rely mostly on voluntary cooperation among WUI property owners and communities to limit wildfires. This fire season and last, the highest fatality rates among WUI residents and wildland firefighters has been in the local-option states of Arizona and Colorado. Arizona's Granite Mountain hotshots lost their lives trying to defend communities that had done little to protect themselves.

Short of becoming a mandatory common-standard state like California or Oregon, we can do much more here in Colorado to mitigate against catastrophic fire, like our neighboring states have already done. We can adopt uniform recommended statewide standards for WUI wildfire mitigation, like Utah. We can require sellers of property in red zones to inform prospective buyers of the heightened risk, and require signed acknowledgment of that risk by the buyer at time of sale, as in California.

We can adopt a "Communities at Risk" system, like Arizona's. This public access database rates fire risk in WUI communities using both natural factors and the degree to which localities are actively implementing a Community Wildfire Protection Plan. The state can do after-incident investigations of every significant wildfire in the WUI to determine whether those burn areas had been adequately mitigated. Utah holds non-mitigating counties liable for wildfires that start on their land.

We can limit new residential land development in the WUI to fire-adapted jurisdictions that have actively implemented Community Wildfire Protection Plans. And we can indemnify fire services that choose not to deploy forces into unmitigated areas.

Will these measures contour, condition and limit the rights of private property owners in the WUI? You bet. Will they call to account local governments in the WUI that are doing nothing or even making matters worse? Absolutely. And will these measures save resident and firefighter lives and property in the WUI? Yes, as the experience of neighboring states has shown.

Every time local governments in local-option states like ours authorize new residential development in the WUI with no mitigation requirements, they endanger the lives of the people who will move there and the firefighters who will try to save them when the next fire comes. The

greatest physical dangers may lie up in the WUI, but we all bear the moral and fiscal responsibility for facing them. We are all paying the price of living in the WUI.

To read the research project, go to <http://www.ucdenver.edu/academics/colleges/SPA/Research/EAWG/Research/wildfires>

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