

We need to decide.....

HOW CAN WE LIVE WITH WILDLAND FIRE? A California Communities Program publication.

The issue for recognizing that we can't do it all, is should we choose to reduce the flammability of our landscape, protect our communities from wildland fire, or make risk-takers pay their fair share of the costs of wildland fire?

Wildland fire is part of living in the West.

Fire is a natural event in the West, occurring when the vegetation and weather are dry. Before the arrival of European settlers, native peoples deliberately set fires to expand open areas for game and to encourage the growth of certain plants, among other purposes. Many scientists agree that periodic fire improves the health of forests, shrublands, and grasslands by stimulating fresh forage for wildlife, reducing pests, providing growing room for surviving plants, and stimulating seed growth.

However, modern incursion into the wildlands has interfered with this natural process. We have changed the landscape, creating large areas where wildlands and homes are mixed together, and our activities have increased the number of fires. Today, whether wildland fires are started by lightning or by human actions, they are increasingly dangerous, costly, and damaging to the environment.

For nearly a century, public policy has centered on putting out all wildland fires because we didn't understand the role of fire in western ecosystems. The result is an unnatural accumulation of dead and dry plant material throughout the I-zones and wildlands. Now when wildland fires begin, they tend to burn much hotter and can quickly rage out of control, devastating human communities and fragile ecosystems alike. This situation will only get worse until our public policies for dealing with wildland fire change.

We have a Problem—Let's Talk About It

Wildland fire has become a problem throughout the western United States as a result of past policy decisions. Now it's time to make some new decisions. Should we:

- 1) Reduce fuel to make fires easier to manage and control?
- 2) Strengthen California communities against wildland fire?
- 3) Make the risk-takers pay?

Or, apply a combination of approaches to the problem?

We know that different places require different approaches, and that we cannot do everything at once. We must make some choices.

Choice #1: Reduce fuel to make fires easier to manage and control

"Our forests have been neglected or protected to death, creating an extreme wildfire risk in wildland urban intermix communities."

—Gerald Adams, N. Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District

What should be done:

- 1) Restore and maintain pre-settlement, fire-resistant forest and rangeland conditions by mechanical and/or biological means and prescribed burning. Practices might include removing diseased trees from forests, clearing undergrowth, and grazing grasslands.
- 2) Create and support markets for excess green and dry material from forests, woodlands and shrublands.
- 3) Limit the interference of competing regulations and authorities with fuel management efforts.
- 4) Establish downstream "water user fees" to help fund fuel reduction on upstream watersheds.

Advocates say:

- 1) Reducing fuels lowers the probability of high-intensity wildfire, decreasing damage to air and water quality and improving wildlife habitat.
- 2) Subsequent to fuel reduction treatment, wildland fires will behave more naturally, will benefit animals and plants, and will be less dangerous to manage.

3) Prescribed burning and mechanical clearing are much less expensive per acre than fighting out-of-control wildfires.

Critics say:

- 1) We don't have proof that fuel reduction will actually prevent wildfires, and, in any case, it will be a long time before enough work can be done to have a significant impact on fire patterns or behavior.
- 2) Getting funding for preventive measures is difficult when money is tight; getting funds for long-term maintenance is even harder.
- 3) Fuel reduction techniques can damage habitat, endanger resources, degrade air quality, and have unsightly results. Also if it escapes, prescribed fire can be dangerous and costly.

Choice #2: Strengthen communities against wildland fire

"In high wind, high temperature, low humidity weather conditions coupled with steep topography and dense fuel conditions, no amount of conventional fire suppression can adequately protect structures that lack defensible space or structural integrity."

—Ronny Coleman, State Fire Marshal

What should be done:

- 1) Require fire hazard to be a major consideration in land use planning. Set strict statewide standards for guiding development in fire-prone areas.
- 2) Require properties in high fire hazard severity areas to adhere to rigid structural and infrastructural regulations.
- 3) Provide tax breaks and lower insurance premiums to property owners who practice defensible space (fuel reduction around structures that provides a safe place from which firefighters can work). Restrict rebuilding of structures damaged or destroyed by fire in high-risk areas.
- 4) Build partnerships among property owners, fire districts, and government agencies to support and implement community-wide defensible space activities.

Advocates say:

- 1) Focusing our efforts on protecting human communities is a manageable way of dealing with the wildland fire problem right away.
- 2) This approach directs funding to areas where there is the highest human and property values.
- 3) We don't really know how to manage ecosystems. This plan lets nature do the job.

Critics say:

- 1) Local governments are notorious for yielding to development pressures.
- 2) Fuel buildup on wildlands outside communities isn't addressed, nor is the fact that intense wildland fire can cross defensible space areas.
- 3) Requiring people to clear vegetation on their own land is an infringement of private property rights.
- 4) People may resist changing the character of their communities.

Choice #3: Make the risk-takers pay

"Americans are used to building what they like where they like and how they like, without ever considering the risk and cost of mitigating that risk."

—Professor Haresh Obayashi, Stanford University

What should be done:

- 1) Require realtors to disclose information on fire hazard rating to potential property buyers.
- 2) Require new development to support its own fire protection; make sure that property owners in high fire hazard areas self-insure their properties and sign a waiver releasing government from obligation to provide fire-related disaster relief.
- 3) Provide hands-on instruction in fire ecology and emergency preparedness to residents of fire-prone areas.

Advocates say:

- 1) People who choose to live in high fire hazard areas should be viewed as risk-takers, not victims, and should accept both the responsibilities and the costs of their decisions as part of the price of living in these areas.
- 2) Expecting society to pay for the choices of those who can afford to gamble is unfair, particularly when many mountain and foothill properties are second homes.
- 3) This option allows people to live where they choose and manage their properties as they see fit, as long as they can afford it.

Critics say:

- 1) Turning our backs on people who have lost everything in wildfires goes against the grain when we customarily assist victims of floods and earthquakes.
- 2) Not everyone living in wildland areas is wealthy. It's unfair to penalize those who can't afford to move or pay fire protection costs.
- 3) The fire suppression policies of public agencies have created our current wildland fire problems; therefore the government should protect endangered property owners.
- 4) Local government cannot afford policies that make high fire severity areas unattractive to new development.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world, indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”

—Margaret Mead

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