

Colo. fires have officials thinking how to pay for future ones

By Jenny Deam, Los Angeles Times

JEFFERSON COUNTY, Colo. — As five major wildfires rage at the onset of a fire season far from over, many in this state are saying the time has come to consider toughening building regulations and shifting some fire protection costs to those who live in danger zones.

After the deadly 2012 Waldo Fire — at the time the most damaging in state history, with 346 homes lost and two deaths — Gov. John Hickenlooper convened a task force to begin to look at ways to restrict or at least rethink how to build on forestland.

Then the 2013 fire season arrived. The Black Forest Fire ignited on June 11, eclipsing the Waldo Fire in its devastation: 509 homes destroyed, 16,000 acres scorched, two dead — a new “worst in history” record.

“This has become the new normal for Colorado,” said a weary Skip Smith, head of the Department of Forest, Rangeland and Watershed Stewardship at Colorado State University, about the worsening toll of wildfires.

A renewed sense of urgency has enveloped the task force members, who are intent on presenting their final recommendations to Hickenlooper, a Democrat, by the end of the summer.

In nature-loving Colorado — where residents relish their mountain views and have built dream homes and moved to subdivisions deep in the woodlands — many worry that

firefighters may not be able to protect forest communities in the new age of heat and drought.

Some recommendations under consideration are unprecedented in Colorado, including assessing additional fire protection fees on residents in high-risk areas, changing insurance rates and enacting brush and tree clearance regulations and stricter building codes that require more fire-resistant materials.

One measure calls for mandatory disclosure of wildfire risks to homeowners. Many people in suburban subdivisions have told authorities they had no idea they lived in danger areas.

“It is not a question of preventing wildfires. There will always be wildfires. But how do you mitigate the risk and reduce the danger?” asked Barbara Kelley, director of the Colorado Department of Regulatory Affairs, who heads the task force.

“We really need to get moving,” she said, “I don’t want to be having this same conversation next summer.”

The task force includes a broad representation of public and private interests – fire officials, home developers, the insurance industry and politicians. More than 1.1 million people in Colorado live in “red zones,” areas at high risk for fire, according to Census data analyzed by I-News Network, a public service journalism organization. That represents roughly 1 in 4 Colorado homes.

If development continues at the current pace, the number of acres of new residential land in forested areas is expected to more than double to 2.1 million by 2030, said Joe Duda, deputy state forester.

“Years ago there were fires, but there were less people in the fire area so it was less critical,” he said, “If we don’t get our arms around this now, it is going to get away from us.”

As he spoke with the *Times* on Thursday night, Duda was packing for mandatory evacuation from the town of South Fork as the massive West Fork Complex wildfire was bearing down. On Friday, the town's entire population of about 600 was ordered out, and officials worried it might not be saved. By Saturday, however, the blaze had slowed its course, easing fears.

Kelly says people who live in fire areas do not typically cause fires or increase their severity, but the resources needed to protect them is extraordinarily high.

She sees the fire protection recommendation as a question of paying your fair share: With the scenery comes responsibility.

Under the current system, there is no disincentive for residents to live in a fire zone, Duda said.

City and county governments often welcome plans for new development and have generally not considered the cost of protecting those homes against fire, he said.

The insurance industry often does not assess higher premiums for homes in fire danger areas, so all homeowners are subsidizing those in high-risk areas, according to testimony at a recent task force meeting.

As development creeps into forested land, thinning of trees and controlled burns also become less palatable to residents. A 2008 assessment of Colorado forests showed millions of acres of trees that were considered unhealthy but allowed to stand.

There is little doubt wildfire protection is getting more expensive, said Ray Rasker, executive director of Headwaters Economics, a nonprofit research group based in Bozeman, Mont., that studies environmental issues in the West.

Nationally, \$3 billion is allocated to federal agencies to fight wildfires – three times the amount a decade ago, Rasker said. Of that, at least a third is going to defend homes.

During the same decade, the number of acres burned across the country doubled, mostly in the West, Rasker said.

Supporters of tougher regulations predict homeowners and some elected officials will push back on the task force's upcoming recommendations.

There is a long-standing tradition in Colorado and other Rocky Mountain states of local governments being reluctant to interfere with something as personal as where people should live. The joke is that "code" is a fighting word.

Rasker says one solution might be to shift some of the burden of protecting homes in forested lands – much of which now is borne by the federal government – to the local level. He said the staggering costs alone might be enough to put some teeth into building restrictions.

"Governments and people have to have the intestinal fortitude to do the right thing, and the right thing is not the easy thing," Duda said. "We're going to have to think differently."