More homes being built in fire-prone areas

By Felicity Barringer, New York Times

The death of 19 firefighters in Arizona recently highlights what has become a fact of life in the West: Every summer, smoke fills the big skies yet people continue to build in the places that burn most. More people live in these areas, and many balk at controls on how and where to build.

Just as many Easterners resist stepping back from their increasingly flooded coast, Westerners build where they want to build.

In a report last September, CoreLogic, a business analytics company, estimated that 740,000 homes in 13 Western states, with a total value of $136 billion, were at high or very high risk of burning up. Nationwide, Oregon and Wisconsin researchers found, 98.5 million people lived in 43.7 million homes in what is known as the wildland-urban interface or WUI (pronounced woo-ee) in 2010.

The sentiment that people should build where and how they choose is embedded in the Bitterroot Valley of western Montana, where a series of infamous 2000 blazes helped usher in the era of ever-more-dangerous Western wildfires.

In 2007, 254 houses burned and nearly 3,100 acres – mostly USFS land – near South Lake Tahoe. Photo/Lake Valley Fire

Seventy houses were destroyed, and one flare-up left Becky Koon, a landscape designer and local school volunteer, briefly frantic over the fate of her 13-year-old daughter, who, oblivious to the sudden danger, was sunbathing at a friend's house. The girls were rescued, and Koon has since tried to help people there lower their risk by reaching out with information about brush- and tree-clearing and other ways to make their homes safer.

But she remains frustrated. "It's a mixed bag," was the best she could say of the reception her neighbors in Ravalli County, Mont., had given her efforts. This is a county whose voters decisively rejected a proposal to initiate local zoning and that prides itself on its log cabins and a belief that government should stay out of people's lives.

Almost 15,700 of Ravalli County's 19,000 homes are built where fires are likely, according to 2010 data compiled by researchers at the University of Wisconsin and Oregon State University. That is nearly double the 8,062 houses in the same area in 1990. Currently, more than 32,000 of the 40,212 people in the county live in the WUI.

But Ravalli county commissioners refused to adopt new maps of this interface, in the face of objections from homeowners and real estate agents that it would depress property values, increase insurance rates and lead to regulation.

As Greg Chilcott, a county commissioner, said: “Regulatory intrusion is a concern. We have somewhat adopted the philosophy, in my mind, that informing citizens of the risk of their choices as to where they build their homes is what our job is — rather than regulating them out of their homes or away from their lands.”

Ravalli County’s resistance to controls either by governments or insurers is hardly unique among the Western states. In fire-prone areas of California, Colorado, Texas, New Mexico and Arizona, the increase in wildfires has been exacerbated by droughts driven by climate change, and beetle infestations that turn evergreen forests into red tree graveyards. But construction has continued apace.

“Up until 2006 to 2008, the trend accelerated,” said Roger Hammer, a sociology professor at Oregon State University who has studied the issue for years. He called the recession “a speed bump” that “isn’t going to change the trend at all.”

But some of the more heavily inhabited places have started to change. The fierceness of recent fires in places like politically liberal Boulder, Colo., and politically conservative Colorado Springs changed minds. This year, Boulder required fire-resistant construction materials in such areas. Colorado Springs used WUI maps as the basis for new controls on hillside construction.

And Colorado’s governor, John Hickenlooper, this year appointed two public-private task forces to look at the issue of how to deal with fire risks.

"One of the things we're looking at is, should there be fee assessments if you're living in that area, to support wildfire-fighting efforts?" said Kelly Campbell, a member of one of the commissions and a vice president of the Property Casualty Insurers Association of America.

Another, she said, is "if we are providing insurance at a rate that is less than the risk, are we encouraging development in an area we might not want to?" But she indicated that until recently the question of wildfire risks was low on the insurance industry's agenda because fire losses make up perhaps 2 percent of total losses, and wildfires even less.

Some communities, like Ruidoso, N.M., have aggressively used state and federal grant money to inform residents — many there only in summer — about mitigating fire risks. The village has stringent requirements for construction and management of trees and brush.

"Some local communities are getting the word," said Stephen Pyne, a historian and expert on Western fires. "But we've got 30-plus years of backlog, of communities that need to be retrofitted, where we have to go back in and put in building codes and zoning and create a fire-resilient landscape. We are not going to banish fire."

Even in the wake of a tragedy like the Yarnell Hill Fire in Arizona, northwest of Phoenix, lessons about lessening risk "are not being learned," said Ray Rasker, executive director of Headwaters Economics, a research group in Bozeman, Mont.

About 16 percent of wildland-urban interface has been developed, he said. "But we're not even having a national conversation about the other 84 percent." He added that "the reason that local governments are not responding and not restricting development is that they don't bear much of the cost” of fighting the fires and cleaning up afterward. “The bulk is borne by the federal taxpayer.”

Indeed, in Ravalli County, Koon pushed to have residents thin out combustible trees and brush on their property. “I was amazed at how many people believe it’s the government’s job to do this,” she said. “… For some of the landowners, it’s summer property. They don’t do anything.”