Fire officials rethinking wildland urban interface protection

By Christie Turner, High Country News

Wildfire in the West is getting more severe all the time – burning longer, hotter and more frequently, destroying more homes, stretching federal funds to the limit, endangering more firefighters. Rising temperatures are driving the trend, and there's no indication things will change course.

Faced with these dire circumstances, 20 of the West's most influential wildfire experts gathered in Jackson Hole, Wyo., at a closed-door Wildfire Solutions Forum last month in an effort to generate radical ideas on how to lessen future fire danger in Western communities. The theme of the event centered on one question: How can we control the pace, scale and pattern of future development of the wildland urban interface, or WUI? Across the West, 84 percent of this interface – where federal public land abuts private land within a one-third-mile radius – remains undeveloped.

This "84 percent" was a rallying cry for the two-day forum, and symbolized a need to shift wildfire conversation away from the portion of WUI that is already developed. This is breakthrough thinking in the world of wildfire policy, where the priority has been to protect existing communities rather than venturing into the realm of future development.

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