

Why homes are lost to wildfire



2007 was the worst fire season in the Lake Tahoe Basin when 254 houses on the South Shore were destroyed. Photo/Lake Valley Fire

By Melissa Mylchreest, High Country News

Each year, wildfires claim hundreds of homes throughout the West in what's known as the wildland-urban interface. This issue roars into the national spotlight every summer as footage of engulfed subdivisions flickers on TVs across the country. National fire suppression budgets reach into the billions of dollars every year, much of that cost associated with protecting homes and structures. But are we approaching the problem from the right angle?

Jack Cohen is a research physical fire scientist with the U.S. Forest Service, based at the Missoula Fire Sciences Laboratory. With four decades of experience, he is a preeminent expert on wildfire and home ignitions, and a founder of the Firewise Communities recognition program, a project of the National Fire Protection Association that helps homeowners protect their property against wildfire.

Years of study have convinced Cohen that the loss of homes to wildfire is as much a sociopolitical problem as it is a physical, on-the-ground problem. Agencies and the public alike approach the issue as a question of fire suppression and control. Cohen, on the other hand, believes that fire is here to stay, and that proper mitigation, awareness and planning can make living with fire a whole lot easier – and safer.

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