

## Thirst for property values leaves Bay Area at risk of wildfires

Peter Fimrite, Chronicle Staff Writer

Sunday, October 28, 2007



David Kessler lived through the nightmare of watching his home burn in the 1991 Oakland hills fire, but he and his neighbors rebuilt anyway.

Kessler, who serves as president of a local homeowners' group, the North Hills Phoenix Association, said there was really no other choice. He, like many others, is gambling that he won't get burned twice.

"It's the whole mantra of the market," he said. "People try to maximize property values."

Thousands of homes throughout the Bay Area have been built in fire-prone areas, particularly on ridges and hills and overlooking canyons. Big houses dot the hills and jut out of wildland areas throughout the East Bay hills and in every county from Marin to Santa Clara. And more are on the way.

It's a reality that could lead to more death and destruction and make fighting a fast-burning fire more difficult, according to firefighters.

"If you have a house right over that slope, particularly with a deck hanging over it, that house becomes like sticking your finger over a candle flame," said urban forester Ray Moritz, a Sausalito-based consultant who works with cities, counties and homeowners associations on fire management plans. "People are putting themselves in harm's way. It is lovely to have a panoramic view from a ridgetop or high on a slope, but the beauty is also a threat."

Such development in "wildland-urban interface zones" contributed to the devastation caused by more than a dozen fires that raged all week from Malibu to the Mexican border, according to state fire officials. California's senior senator, Dianne Feinstein, took the issue to the Senate floor last week to urge tougher zoning laws to prevent building in areas likely to burn.

The problem is so widespread, however, that a foolproof solution may be impossible to find, experts say.

There are homes and structures in virtually every county along the urban-wildland boundary in California, much of which has an ecosystem of dry grass, thick brush and dense trees that Mother Nature designed to be periodically burned. It's an environment that makes homes hard to defend, but it is increasingly where firefighters are forced to fight.

Keith Richter, the fire chief for the Contra Costa Fire Protection District, said there are 5,000 homes and homesites in the hills of Lafayette and Walnut Creek that are in areas he calls "priority hazard zones." He said at least 5,000 more homes cover fire-prone ridges and hillsides from Walnut Creek to the Oakland-Berkeley hills.

"It is certainly potentially bad, and they continue to build houses in those areas, so there are new homes mixed with older homes," said Richter, whose fire district coordinates the deployment of firefighters from 16 coastal counties during mutual aid situations. "We have areas of the East Bay that would rival what is happening in Southern California under the right conditions. And no agency is equipped to handle that kind of situation."

The danger is spreading. A two-year study completed this year by the nonprofit Sierra Nevada Alliance found that the number of people living in extreme or very high fire-threat areas in 22 Sierra counties increased 16 percent between 1990 and 2000. It showed that 94 percent of new home development planned in the 400-mile region covering the foothills and mountains is also within these danger zones.

Sprawling growth is stretching many communities thin. State and federal taxpayers are being forced to foot the bill for communities that cannot afford to maintain roads, build new infrastructure, and pay for the fire protection necessary to keep up with the growth.

The U.S. Forest Service spends almost \$1 billion annually protecting private homes adjacent to national forests. State fire spending increased 10 percent between 1994 and 2004, due in large part to the need to protect homes in wildland areas, according to a recent report on wildland fires.

Local and state agencies and regulators are beginning to sound the alarm and policies are slowly changing.

The state recently increased from 30 to 100 feet the amount of "defensible space" - essentially a firebreak - homeowners are required to maintain around their homes. Although the rules apply to state-controlled land, most local and county fire departments have adopted the 100-foot clearance rule.

Strict new state fire codes are expected to be enacted in 2008 for property in high-hazard zones. The new policies would include restrictions on building materials, enforcement of defensible space provisions and require the use of fire-resistant landscaping, among other things.

Richter said road widths of at least 22 feet, allowing fire engines to maneuver while residents are fleeing, have become common in new hillside neighborhoods.

Marin County, identified as a particular fire danger zone, does not allow development within 100 feet vertically and 300 feet horizontally from the top of any ridge. Still, there are many older homes, particularly in leafy Mill Valley, that are surrounded by vegetation and accessible only via narrow, twisting roads.

Some conservation groups advocate forcing homeowners in high-fire-threat areas to pay the cost of protecting their homes.

Kessler said the 3,000 Oakland homeowners who rebuilt after the devastating 1991 Oakland hills fire are especially diligent when it comes to fire safety - taxing themselves, among other things, to fund fire services.

"It would be great if communities were only built near mass transit and all urban sprawl was stopped, but it's very hard, when people have private property, to interfere with their right to build," said Kessler, who rebuilt his own home after it was destroyed in the 1991 fire. "Cities can make requirements, but in real life it's a hard political struggle to say, 'Here's this lovely hillside with beautiful views of the bay, and you can't build on it because in 20 years there might be fire.' "

The reconstruction of burned homes in the Oakland and Berkeley hills is just one example of the same dynamic. Property owners rebuilt on Mount Vaca after a wind-driven fire destroyed seven ridgetop homes west of Vacaville in 1988. Virtually all of

the 45 homes destroyed on Inverness Ridge in West Marin during the Mount Vision Fire in 1995 have been rebuilt in the same fire-prone spot.

Building permits are already being requested for homes destroyed in the recent fires in Southern California. It's a safe bet to say that some of the 250 homes destroyed during last summer's Angora Fire in South Lake Tahoe will be rebuilt soon.

"Most people are either in denial or have somehow convinced themselves that the problem is not so serious," said Moritz, the forester. "Before the Inverness Fire, people were saying, 'Well it's too moist here,' or, 'Oh, that's what I get insurance for.' But people don't realize what it's like to lose all the physical evidence of their life history. It's a very shocking and depressing experience."

Besides, Moritz said, there are great incentives to build on hillsides and ridgetops. Such homes are usually high-end and result in big fees and property tax revenues for cities and counties, he said.

Community opposition is often a big obstacle to efforts to reduce fire danger. UC Berkeley recently began chopping down a thousand highly flammable eucalyptus trees and shrubs on 250 acres above the campus in Claremont Canyon, but a local group is trying to block the logging operation despite the role such trees played in spreading the 1991 fire.

Development in California may eventually go the way of five subdivisions in San Diego designed specifically to protect residents. These neighborhoods, developed using what has been called a "shelter in place" program, did not lose a single house in the recent firestorm.

The program imposes construction and landscaping standards so stringent that homeowners are supposed to be able to remain sheltered in their houses if they cannot evacuate.

In the end, said Alex Naar, fire management officer for the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, it comes down to what price citizens are willing to pay for living in the Bay Area.

"The balance of wanting to live in beautiful places is we have a responsibility to keep the natural resources healthy and safe," Naar said. "It can't be the fire department alone that makes the effort. It has to be a public-private partnership."

### **Online resources**

The "wildland-urban interface" is defined as areas containing human developments threatened by wildland fires. In California, a recent analysis indicated that more than 5 million homes are located in these areas. For a map, see the Web address below. Select "wildland urban interface" in the "Choose Layer" box.

[giifweb.cnr.berkeley.edu/fire/california](http://giifweb.cnr.berkeley.edu/fire/california)