

Feds, states press communities to defend against wildfire

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MONUMENT, Colo. -- Jean Rodeck looks at her neatly groomed yard, her expertly thinned forest and the five firebreaks cut into the nearby hill -- and knows she could still lose everything to a wildfire.

Despite pumping hundreds of hours and a considerable amount of money into work to reduce her home's vulnerability to wildfire, Rodeck's home in the foothills northwest of Colorado Springs remains in danger because many of her neighbors have not taken such precautions.

"I know if there's a fire, that I'm just in this little mitigated island of two acres," said the 72-year-old Rodeck, who retired after 42 years with the National Park Service. "I know that I've pretty well had it, in spite of all the work I've done."

As development in or near national forests grows, federal and state officials say working with individual property owners to reduce fire danger isn't enough. They've begun the sometimes difficult task of persuading entire communities to embrace fire prevention.

"Everybody has a stake of this in the community," said Michele Steinberg, communities support manager for Firewise, a national group that works with homeowners, community leaders, developers and others to reduce the risk of wildfires. "We can't willy-nilly put development in and expect the fire department to deal with it."

Working with communities to prevent fires isn't new. But after the wildfire season of 2000 -- when fires burned more than 8.4 million acres across the nation -- the government made it a priority. Its 10-year fire plan mandated helping communities develop prevention plans.

"Efforts have shifted from individual homes to trying to work on a larger scale," said Don Artley, national fire director for the National Association of State Foresters.

Adding urgency is the growing number of people building their homes in or near the timber, and the growing fire risk posed by buildup of fuels -- brush, branches and the like -- on the forest floor.

Communities ranging from whole counties to crowded subdivisions to entire cities face fire risk, according to the association.

There are incentives. The 2003 Healthy Forests Restoration Act ordered federal land managers to consider the wishes of communities that complete Community Wildfire Protection Plans. Those with plans can lobby for increased thinning of nearby national forest, for example.

According to a survey released in March by the Council for Western State Foresters, 300 protection plans covering more than 2,000 communities at risk in 17 Western states have been completed. Additional plans were done, but they didn't meet requirements of the 2003 law.

Community protection plans can include wildfire response guidelines from local firefighters; recommendations to thin woods and shrubs; and requirements for new subdivisions, including

mandatory building material standards and multiple exit roads.

The foresters' survey, however, found that many states report challenges in creating the plans -- a lack of interest at the community level, a lack of resources to invest and an unrealistic belief that finishing the task will quickly bring federal dollars.

Curt Grina, who lives on 35 acres in Colorado's Teller County, said it was hard to convince his neighbors there was even a danger. Many were recent transplants who had never seen a wildfire or second-home owners who visited only occasionally.

Once residents accepted there was a problem, many become overwhelmed or felt helpless. Grina said the challenge was helping them see they could make a difference.

"You can't do anything about hurricanes, but the threat of wildfire in areas like this, in fact there's a lot you can do about it," he said. "There's an answer."

Teller County, in fact, is an example of a community that has embraced the idea of a protection plan.

County Administrator Greg Winkler said he believes reminders of the state's worst blaze -- the 2002 Hayman fire that destroyed 85 homes in the county -- prompted interest in a protection plan, which was completed in May 2005. It includes working with the Forest Service to thin federal forest near neighborhoods and a fire mitigation assistance center.

"The people are starting to recognize that there's no magic wand," Winkler said. "The county can't do it, the U.S. Forest Service can't do it all. There has to be some self-reliance on each individual who owns property in the county."