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Officials wise up about wildfires and building homes in the ‘Stupid Zone’



A home is destroyed in the path of the Valley Fire near the Lake County community of Seigler Springs last year. **Marcus Yam** Los Angeles Times file

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Dozens of wildfires are burning throughout California in another drawn-out fire season that is becoming the new normal: longer, hotter and claiming more houses.

It's [our fault, scientists say](#), especially those of us who found our little piece of heaven under tall pines and on mountain slopes where natural fires have historically cleansed the landscape in cycles that rejuvenate ecosystems. Now we're there – millions of us around the state.

We are living in “Stupid Zones,” a term coined more than a decade ago by the late [Ed Quillen](#), a humorist and Denver Post columnist. He used it to lampoon areas where experts have identified one hazard or another and determined that they are dumb places to build houses.

Take a tinder-box neighborhood, where fuels and topography make it a matter of time before wildfire will threaten homes. Quillen reasoned that people choosing such a Stupid Zone should be free to do what they want; it's their Uncle Sam-given private property right. Government, however, should not pay for the consequences of their decisions.

What Quillen didn't know then is that the cost of protecting structures from fire is now zapping more than 30 percent of total wildfire costs, with some estimates ranging as high as 90 percent. An [in-depth analysis](#) by [Headwaters Economics](#) placed the average cost of defending a home in the Sierra Nevada at \$82,000, and as high as \$600,000 per home.

The Stupid Zone for fire evolved in the hands of Realtors, county and U.S. Forest Service officials, who for decades encouraged development in remote forest areas. It was an era when they believed we could – and should – control wildfire. Today the [science makes it clear](#) that this thinking is little more than hubris.

Cal Fire has identified almost all of [Northern California as under high threat](#) for fire. Much of that land includes subdivisions and single homes built close to national forests, regions known as the Wildland-Urban Interface.

The good news is that 90 percent of Northern California's Wildland-Urban Interface is still undeveloped. The flip side: If all that land goes to full build-out, protecting structures from fire would overwhelm budgets at all levels of government and would likely be little more than a Sisyphean effort.

Local officials are starting to get it. Plumas County has more homes in a Wildland-Urban Interface than any other far Northern California county – a total of 7,494. One of them is mine. Yet while they contest this dubious distinction, Plumas officials have taken significant steps to ensure that additional homes will not be built in Quillen’s Stupid Zones.

Before allowing a new subdivision, however small, the developer must provide two access roads, now a statewide guideline. And Plumas was one of the first California counties to require structural fire protection before approving new parcels. That leaves a 21-lot subdivision proposed for Warner Valley north of Chester in limbo. Unless the owner can find a way to annex to a fire district, he is wasting his time, said Plumas County Planning Director Randy Wilson: “We’re holding strong. We can’t make these mistakes anymore.”

But Plumas officials did not take the more radical step of prohibiting building on existing parcels outside fire districts. “People have a right to build on their own land,” said Sherrie Thrall, chair of the Plumas Board of Supervisors.

If Quillen, who died in 2012, had his way, when a fire breaks out these homeowners would be on their own for protection. Local fire districts would build their fire lines at their boundaries, leaving the residents to defend – and pay for – their decisions.

There’s a certain appealing survival-of-the-fittest logic to the Stupid Zone. But then, this is California: If the fire next time doesn’t get us, it’s likely to be The Big One.

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