

Steps can be taken to minimize destruction of homes by fire

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by [Randy Bright](#)

California has long been plagued by wildfires. This year the wildfires were particularly deadly with over 40 people killed in last month's wildfire in Northern California. Dry and windy conditions made the fires difficult to fight and contain. Even though more than 10,000 firefighters from California and surrounding states worked around the clock, one early report by Randal O'Toole (CATO Institute) indicated that 1,700 homes and about 1,000 other structures were destroyed in fires that covered about 474,000 acres.

In an article entitled *What Happens After Half Your Town Burns Down*, writer John Sanphillippo wrote about the impact the fires were having on hard-hit towns like Santa Rosa that had housing shortages and shortages of affordable housing even before the fires struck. He wrote, "The loss of so many homes has only made a bad situation worse. The surviving stock of properties and rental accommodations will only become more expensive as the market tightens up even more. Will zoning regulations and building codes be relaxed in order to allow more properties to be built quickly, or will the devastation trigger new rules and restrictions that make reconstruction even harder at higher prices? I answered, 'all of the above'."

Sanphillippo speculated that the owners of mobile homes in a particular mobile home park would not rebuild. Because they did not own the land where their mobile homes were, "the chances that they will ever return to this spot again are very close to zero. Whoever does own the land has just been given a unique opportunity to redevelop the site at a much higher value. The city will encourage the upzoning of the property for all the usual reasons: economic development, job creation, revenue enhancement, et cetera. The previous inhabitants will find their way to new homes – probably in other states entirely."

O'Toole makes the point in his report that many of the home fires could be prevented by practicing "Firewise" principles recommended by the NFPA. These include techniques that prevent the homes from being ignited through the use of non-combustible materials, landscaping with fire resistant plants, creating fuel breaks, among others. He wrote, "...five neighborhoods in San Diego County were designed to be so fire safe that residents were encouraged to stay in their homes during the fires rather than evacuate. The fires touched upon several of these neighborhoods, yet not a single home was burned. On the other hand, the Associated Press reports that half (of) the fire-related deaths resulted from evacuations."

The conventional wisdom, O'Toole points out, is that fire breaks such as large parking lots or highways, and the practice of "thinning" trees in forests will prevent the fires from spreading. However, this proved to be inaccurate, as maps of the recent burned areas indicated that neither practice prevented the fires from spreading when conditions were as dry and windy as they were.

The practice of dense development that many local governments are adopting is also creating a much higher risk of the spread of fire. When homes are not sufficiently space apart, radiant heat

from one house fire can quickly ignite the house next door to it, creating a chain reaction that can lead to entire subdivisions being destroyed.

This drive for density – especially in suburban areas that adjoin rural or forested areas – makes it difficult to prevent large groups of homes from burning when wind-driven fires from forests or grassy fields can expose many homes at a time, starting the chain reaction.

There was a time when natural fires swept across vast areas of our lands, keeping underbrush growth from accumulating. American Indians, I am told, would often burn their campsites and the surrounding areas when they moved on to another place. This practice reduced the fuel load created by the accumulation of brush, and also helped control the insect populations. At some point, presumably out of the fear of causing the destruction of buildings as well as forests, this practice was stopped or at least discouraged. Instead, we either allow the undergrowth to accumulate or we brush hog our properties, hoping that the mulch will decompose before it is exposed to fire. The results are the devastating damage that wildfires have caused when burning undergrowth ignites trees.

Dense development that virtually eliminates landscaping and trees may be an answer to prevention, but who wants that? Even the urbanists want heavy landscaping. Regardless, people who lose their homes to wildfires should not lose their property rights; let them choose how to best protect their property.



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