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Report: Wildfire Costs Will Soar if Building Trends Continue

Protecting new homes from Western wildfires will cost U.S. taxpayers billions in coming years

BOZEMAN - New development near fire-prone public forests will put more homes and firefighters at risk and boost firefighting costs for U.S. taxpayers by billions of dollars, according to a new report released today by Headwaters Economics in Bozeman, Montana.

In a county-by-county study of 11 western states, Headwaters found that only 14 percent of the available “wildland urban interface” in the West is currently developed, leaving tremendous potential for new home construction in the remaining 86 percent. According to the Office of Inspector General, protecting private property from forest fires consumed between 50 percent and 95 percent of all firefighting costs in recent years. The cost to U.S. taxpayers of protecting privately owned properties in the wildland urban interface has been estimated by Forest Service managers to be as high as \$1 billion each year. If just half of the wildland urban interface is developed in the future, annual firefighting costs could explode to \$2.3 to \$4.3 billion. By comparison, the Forest Service’s average annual budget is about \$4.5 billion.

“It’s easy to understand why people want to live in beautiful forested areas, but our analysis indicates things will get much worse for U.S. firefighting efforts if current building trends continue,” said Ray Rasker Ph.D., Executive Director of Headwaters Economics. “With more and more homes in the woods, we’ll see skyrocketing firefighting costs for taxpayers and more difficult and dangerous fire seasons for firefighters.”

With more private residences built adjacent to forested public lands, it has become more difficult and expensive to fight the inevitable wildfires that are part of life in the arid West. Building remote homes - one fifth of which are second homes or vacation getaways – on the outskirts of western forests already consumes a majority of U.S. firefighting resources.

For this study, Headwaters created state maps depicting the proximity (within 500 meters) of homes to public forestlands to indicate where firefighting dollars will be spent in the coming years. The study also ranks individual counties for existing and future potential risk from wildfire. Some key findings include:

- Oregon has nearly 6,000 square miles of forested private land bordering public lands, of which 90 percent has not yet been developed.
- California has the most homes built next to public forestlands, and is second only to Oregon in square miles of wildland interface with the potential to be developed.
- Private homes in Montana's wildland urban interface consume a hefty 6.1 acres per person, compared to the 0.5 acres per person average on other private lands in the West.
- Colorado has 94,739 residences in its wildland urban interface, of which 38 percent are seasonal homes or cabins.

While most analyses and all existing federal wildfire policies have focused on improving wildland fuels management to reduce wildfire risks, the Headwaters study looks at the long-term repercussions of development in high-risk areas. With the release of these findings, Headwaters hopes to refocus the attention of policy makers and western communities on the ramifications of current growth trends, and set the stage for discussion about the need for a course correction to keep homes and firefighters safe and firefighting costs in check. By incorporating wildfire risk into land use planning, counties can play an important leadership role in guiding new construction away from fire-prone areas.

“We can't control the weather or where fires will start, but we can control where we build new homes,” says Rasker. “Our local communities plan for parks, we plan for traffic, and we plan for water. We need to plan for wildfire as well.”

The report can be accessed at <http://www.headwaterseconomics.org/wildfire>