
Testimony of Kimiko Barrett, Ph.D.

House Natural Resources Committee, Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands hearing on “Examining Coronavirus Impacts on Wildland Fire Operations and Vulnerable Communities,” June 10, 2020

Thank you Chairwomen Haaland and members of the committee.

Wildfires are inevitable yet the disasters they yield do not have to be. After more than a century of structured fire management and decades of research, we have learned a lot about wildfires.

We understand more about their behavior on the landscape, how a wildfire burns down a home, and how—through a single ignition source—an entire community can be threatened.

We also know that wildfires are becoming more frequent and severe, while at the same time more homes are being built in wildfire-prone areas. And we have seen how the impacts of wildfire disproportionately affect the most vulnerable populations who may not have the physical and economic means to prepare, respond, recover, and rebuild.

Unfortunately, many of the people vulnerable to wildfire are also vulnerable to the health and economic impacts from the coronavirus pandemic: the elderly, lower-income families, the disabled, and black, indigenous, and people of color.

These populations may experience challenges with mobility, making evacuation difficult. They may suffer from health complications further aggravated by wildfire smoke. They may experience economic instability that makes preparing for and recovering from wildfire disasters more problematic, and they may face institutional barriers to physical and economic recovery. For populations most at risk, the impacts from wildfires coupled with the coronavirus will exacerbate existing inequalities.

And while we are just beginning to understand the new and onerous challenges of the coronavirus, we have a wealth of science, resources, and best practices to reduce wildfire risks. We know how to build homes and plan communities to live with wildfire.

With this aim, I want to share two new exciting resources with you: the first is the Community Planning Assistance for Wildfire program—created by Headwaters Economics in partnership with Wildfire Planning International and the US Forest Service Rocky Mountain Research Station. This program provides communities with land use planning recommendations, customized research tools, local hazard mapping, and capacity trainings to better understand and plan the wildland-urban interface.

Our work underscores the need to anticipate and envision the inevitability of wildfires. It is not possible, nor is it safe, to assume that we can extinguish all wildfires. Individual homeowners and local governments must ready themselves now for a wildfire before it occurs—especially during the pandemic.

For example, residents able to practice stay-at-home measures can carry out many preventative steps to make their structures more wildfire resistant. Relatively simple and affordable tasks can reduce wildfire risks. Residents can take steps now such as safely storing combustible material like firewood away from the home; trimming trees and reducing vegetation within 100 feet of any structure; replacing wood mulch with rock mulch in garden beds; removing leaves and debris from gutters and roofs; and hardening vulnerable features of the home with ignition-resistant building materials.

These basic measures increase the survivability of a home during a wildfire and—especially important during a pandemic—allow firefighters and first responders to address other urgent needs.

The second resource I want to share with you is the Wildfire Risk to Communities website, a brand-new nationwide tool that—for the first time—maps and identifies wildfire risk at the community level.

Wildfire Risk to Communities provides easy-to-use interactive maps and resources to help communities understand, explore, and reduce wildfire risk. Created in response to the 2018 Omnibus Act, Wildfire Risk to Communities was developed in partnership with US Forest Service Research, Pyrologix, and Headwaters Economics. The website provides detailed information about wildfire risk to homes and vulnerable populations in any selected community, while also offering resources to address and mitigate that risk.

Make no doubt about it, managing wildfires under the burden of a pandemic will not be easy. Vulnerable populations will be especially hard hit by the dual impacts of wildfire and the coronavirus.

Of these two crises however, we already have the knowledge and experience to prepare for and reduce the risks from wildfires. This is a solvable problem—we know how to build communities to survive a wildfire.

Communities need help though, particularly during times of pandemic and economic hardship. I encourage you to support and expand prevention and planning efforts to increase the safety of communities, vulnerable populations, and our firefighting forces before wildfires become disasters.

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About Headwaters Economics

Headwaters Economics is an independent, nonprofit research group whose mission is to improve community development and land management decisions. <https://headwaterseconomics.org/>