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Study: Fireproof neighborhoods shrink wildfires

By: DAVE DOWNEY - Staff Writer

As Southern Californians brace for the most dangerous part of wildfire season, they would do well to make their homes as fireproof as possible, researchers say.

Clearing vegetation around houses and upgrading homes with nonflammable materials can not only protect lives and property, but can also help keep a wildfire from growing, according to a new study by researchers from California and Colorado.

It sounds strange, said Patrick Bourgeron, a researcher at the University of Colorado and lead author on the study, but "we need to protect the fires from houses."

Bourgeron said that is because unprotected houses tend to be more flammable than the trees and bushes around them. So when houses burn, he said in a telephone interview last week from Boulder, Colo., they accelerate the spread of a wildfire and multiply its size.

"The message here is that fireproofing homes not only preserves structures, but limits the size of forest fires," Bourgeron said. "So fireproofing one's home not only protects the people who live in it, it also protects their neighbors and, ultimately, the forests."

It is far better for the area if entire neighborhoods ---- rather than individual homeowners ---- take steps to protect homes, said UCLA professor Michael Ghil, who co-authored the study.

"If you think you're doing well by yourself by fireproofing, well, that may be so," Ghil said by telephone from Paris, where he also conducts research. "But it really makes a difference if the whole community gets together and fireproofs."

In that scenario, a neighborhood becomes a "fire break," Bourgeron said.

"And it's going to make the fire much smaller than it could be," he added.

The bottom line, he said, is houses are hardly neutral features.

"They are a part of the landscape and they will have a positive or negative effect on fire," Bourgeron said.

Too often, the effect is negative.

That was the case with the Hayman fire of June 2002, one of the largest wildfires in Colorado history. The blaze, which raced across 17 miles in one day and threatened Denver's suburbs, torched 138,000 acres and destroyed 132 homes.

The Hayman fire was the ignition point for the new study. Bourgeron said he was inspired to investigate what impact houses had on the giant blaze's spread.

He concluded that the pine forest tended to hold up better where there weren't structures than in places where the forest was filled with summer cabins and backwoods homes.

"Where you had homes, (the forest) burned to the ground," Bourgeron said.

He said the fire probably would have been smaller if it weren't for so many homes in its path.

The researchers used computer models to study the spread of fires in forests of Colorado, Montana, New Mexico, Utah, Washington and Wisconsin.

Bourgeron said the study has implications for government forest-thinning programs, such as those under way in the mountains of San Diego County and the popular Idyllwild area of Riverside County. Thinning the woods costs tens of millions of dollars each year.

"If the growing number of homes built ... aren't fireproofed, it is essentially a waste of money," he said.

Homeowners can fireproof their homes by planting trees and shrubs well away from outer walls, building roofs out of tile or asphalt shingles instead of wood, and locating fuel tanks far from structures, among other measures.

For tips, go to www.firewise.org.

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