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Fire danger - 'It can't be ignored any longer'

Drought, development and rising temperatures are putting many neighborhoods in the path of wildfires. This week, homeowners will gather



Dale Hildebrandt is educating other homeowners on fire prevention. She stands in front of the remains of a Rocky Mountain juniper scorched several years ago in a wildfire that burned part of her land in Red Rock Estates. (DAVID B. PARKER/RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL)

for the first time to find ways to protect themselves. Are you ready to do your share? Coming together to reduce fire d

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Dale Hildebrandt lives in the danger zone. She's racing against time to protect herself, her home and the community she loves from wildland fire.

If she doesn't do something now, Hildebrandt knows her way of life in Red Rock will be over.

"Lightning strikes, a cigarette butt or a spark from an ATV," Hildebrandt said. "It only takes one to destroy everything."

In the Red Rock corridor, the threat is higher: no fire department, no fire hydrants, no water supply.

"It gets more nerve-racking with each passing day," she said. "People think disastrous fires only happen on TV or somewhere else and that they can't happen here, but they're wrong. It's just a matter of time. Conditions have never been so extreme."

Fire and forestry officials rank the Red Rock area as extreme or high in fire danger. As with other areas around the Truckee Meadows, Storey County, Lake Tahoe Basin and the Carson Forest District that have been evaluated, the threat has been created in Red Rock by continued development into wildlands, extreme terrain, invasive vegetation, overstocked stands of pine and the position of the sun.

"We're living in a real hazard zone," Hildebrandt said. "Everyone needs to take action."

This week, Hildebrandt and other Nevada homeowners will join government officials to plan an attack on the problem before it worsens.

The Nevada Wildland-Urban Interface Fire Summit on Wednesday in Reno is the state's first attempt to

reduce wildfire threats to high-risk neighborhoods.

"This wildfire threat-reduction business is not going to be over in a season; it's forever," said Ed Smith, a summit coordinator and natural resource specialist with the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension who has spent the last two decades pushing fire-prevention education, including efforts on the Web site www.livingwithfire.com.

"What we need now is accountability, and for everyone, which means down to the homeowners, to take their roles seriously," Smith said. "We've been dodging bullets for a long time, and the fires are not going away. Fires will only get worse in our region."

He said homeowners must do their part.

"People who live here have an important role to play," Smith said. "Homeowners need to realize that they're living in fire country and fires burned through here all the time. What has changed are all these homes and all these people who have packed onto and into it."

The most recent figures dramatize Smith's point. According to a recent report by the Sierra Nevada Alliance, an environmental organization, the number of homes built in wildfire-prone areas in Nevada doubled to 466,500 from 1990 to 2000. That's a 92 percent increase, higher than anywhere in the nation.

People need a plan

Smith hopes the summit will open the door for collaboration.

Homeowners and neighborhood representatives from 27 Nevada communities will meet at the Regional Public Safety Training Facility in Reno to create a system that works for each community, organizing its people and resources.

"This is a start to what we expect will become an annual event," Smith said. "We want to begin dialogues, conversations that will continue on after the summit. We need accountability on who is doing what and then come back and assess the situation. We've had some bad fires, with Hawken and Angora, but it's nothing compared to the disasters that are to come."

Fire and forestry officials warned this fire season could be "unprecedented" and had "record-setting conditions" during the initial assault against the Hawken Fire, which consumed nearly 2,500 acres of wildlands behind Caughlin Ranch in July.

Before Hawken, the Angora Fire that started June 24 destroyed 254 homes, 75 other structures and 3,100 acres of wildland near South Lake Tahoe. Damage was estimated at \$160 million. It burned to within a mile of the Lake Tahoe shoreline and threatened at times to jump into the city proper.

Serious business for everyone

"It can't be ignored any longer," said Kacey KC, conservation specialist for community protection for the Nevada Division of Forestry. "Community involvement is the key. Agencies can get things started and then only do so much if homeowners do not take action."

She plans to attend the summit to lend her expertise on conservation efforts and resources for homeowners.

Hungry Valley Fire Chief David Hunkup said the summit provides the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony leader with an opportunity to hear what others are doing.

"We're always trying to educate the community about the dangers of fire," Hunkup said. "There have been so many times in which kids have been playing with matches and started fires. We're ready and prepared, but it's always good to hear about the resources available."

Hungry Valley has a significant history of fires. Lightning often strikes the rolling expanse of sage and bitterbrush, igniting the dry vegetation.

"Our prevailing south and southwest winds add to the danger of the land," Hunkup said. "A spark can send a fire ripping right through our community, The more we know, the more our community knows, the better. I am hoping to meet everyone and come to the table to share, exchange, learn and move forward."

No community is immune

Hungry Valley joins Mount Rose, Antelope Valley, Warm Springs and western Washoe Valley as corridors ranked highest for fire danger, according to forestry and fire assessments. That means extreme conditions exist and homeowners in those areas are on high alert.

For example: