

ROOM *for* DEBATE

Homeowners Need to Take Responsibility

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The latest wildfires in the West have led to renewed calls for regulation of private lands to stop the construction of homes and other buildings that may be in the path of future fires. Such regulation is neither necessary nor appropriate.

It isn't appropriate because what people do with their own property should be between them and their insurance company. There are risks to living everywhere, and denying people the right to use their own land in the forests will simply lead them to build in the path of tornados, floods, earthquakes or other potential threats.

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Regulation isn't necessary because Forest Service research has shown that wildland property owners can use simple techniques to protect their structures from the worst of fires, including using non-flammable materials for roofs and eaves and keeping vegetation within about 140 feet of the structure neatly trimmed. Such techniques are called "firewise," and the most extreme measures produce "shelter-in-place" homes that are so fire-resistant that the safest place to be in the event of a wildfire is in the house.

When a 2007 fire swept through five shelter-in-place communities outside of San Diego, not a single home was scorched. This led some to argue that people shouldn't be allowed to use those techniques because it would simply lead to more people living in the wildland-urban interface.

This hints at the real reason for some people want regulation: they simply want to limit rural development. The state land development agency in my own state of Oregon argues that it needs to limit rural home construction to prevent "lawyers and doctors" from building in rural areas. Apparently, only those with rural occupations should be allowed to live on their own land in rural areas.

We live in a big country. But we also live with small-minded people who grab at the flimsiest of excuses to try to control where people live and how they use their own property.

If fire in the wildland-urban interface is a problem, it is because people have come to depend on the federal government to use extraordinary resources in suppressing fires. Instead, people should take responsibility by making their own properties fire-safe.