



A CALL TO END THE DESTRUCTION OF COMMUNITIES BY WILDFIRE

Policy 1: Require all homes and businesses in the wildland/urban interface to be more resistant to ignition from wildfire embers and flames

Over the past decade, the U.S. has witnessed a steady increase in wildfire activity. Experts predict this trend will continue. Despite billions of dollars to support wildland fire suppression efforts, the number of homes lost in wildfires per year has increased by 163 percent, and wildfires now cost the U.S. an estimated \$63 to \$285 billion per year in losses.

Today there are nearly 45 million homes in the wildland/urban interface (WUI), the term that describes the area where homes and communities encroach wildfire hazard-prone landscapes. Thus, while influencing the siting and construction of new homes is important, the bulk of the wildfire risk exists in homes already built. Research has consistently shown the role embers play in igniting homes in the WUI. It has also shown that there is an increased survival rate of homes constructed from fire-resistant materials on property that has been mitigated to remove sources of fuel for a fire. To stem the tide of loss from wildfires, millions of homes must be retrofitted to reduce the risk of ignition. This transformation can be realized through continued research and development, public education, financial incentives, and robust support from all levels of government.

When it comes to research, progress is still needed on several fronts, including the development of performance-based product test standards that better reflect how materials will perform when exposed to exterior flame exposure, radiant heat, and the impact of embers from a wildfire. Developing these referenced standards will help guide architects, builders, and homeowners alike to easily source products and materials that will perform as intended during wildfires. Also needed is continued research to support the development and validation of retrofit methods, particularly those that are most cost-effective. Finally, while there are building standards to improve wildfire safety for new construction (e.g., NFPA 1144, *Standard for Reducing Structure Ignition Hazards from Wildland Fire* and Chapter 7A of the California Building Code), there is no consensus standard yet available for the retrofit of structures, particularly those within 30 feet of one another. Given the prevalence of such development within the WUI, standards-making organizations need to fill this gap as soon as possible.

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Guidance, updated with the latest knowledge, must also reach homeowners. States have a significant role to play in ensuring their citizens are informed. They can play this role not only through their own agencies and programs, but also by relying on extension services and voluntary programs such as Firewise USA® and the Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network. In addition, states need to support the development of a skilled workforce that homeowners can turn to for help assessing and mitigating wildfire risks to their home and property.

Voluntary initiatives can be successful in transforming homes and communities. For example, residents of nearly 2,000 Firewise communities have already taken steps to make their homes more resistant to ignition from wildfire. However, action from government and other parties—notably insurers—is necessary to aid in that transformation. States and localities

must have regulations or ordinances in place that require property owners to maintain defensible space, ensuring that the area immediately around the home is clear of vegetation and other sources of fuel. And, as insurers face ever-increasing losses from wildfires, working with insured homeowners to improve the ignition resistance of their properties can be another crucial mechanism for motivating behavior.

Of course, while some steps, like cleaning gutters and clearing yard debris are accessible steps for many homeowners, they may not be for others, such as the elderly and people with disabilities. Furthermore, more intensive home improvements that will reduce risk even further, like replacing combustible roofing materials or installing double-paned windows, may require incentives even for those homeowners with means. Policymakers at both the state and federal level need to therefore strongly consider creating tax incentives to support retrofitting activities. They must also ensure grants and low-cost loans are available to aid mitigation and retrofitting efforts for those who otherwise lack resources.

Given the size and scope of the U.S. wildfire challenge, reaching the goals of a comprehensive wildfire strategy, including the requirement that all homes and businesses in the WUI be more resistant to ignition from wildfire embers and flames, will take time. But making progress toward these goals will reduce the risk to American homes, businesses, and prosperity. **The key to ending the destruction of communities by wildfire is to start now.**

Learn more about Outthink Wildfire by visiting [nfpa.org/wildfirepolicy](https://www.nfpa.org/wildfirepolicy).

CITATIONS AND REFERENCES

www.nfpa.org/wildfirepolicy



RESOURCES

- NFPA: [Firewise USA® Recognition Program](#)
- NFPA: [Preparing Homes for Wildfire](#)
- Headwaters Economics: [Building a Wildfire-Resistant Home/Codes and Costs](#)
- Insurance Institute for Business & Home Safety: [Wildfire Risk Research](#)

The National Fire Protection Association® (NFPA®) outlined a comprehensive strategy that will push for the transformations that, over time, will significantly reduce risk to communities. The strategy is rooted in two realities—wildfires are going to happen, and the fire service will not be able to extinguish wildfires at a pace to save people and property in their path.

To solve the wildfire problem, these five tenets must be supported by all levels of government:

- 1. Require all homes and businesses in the wildland/urban interface (WUI) to be more resistant to ignition from wildfire embers and flames.**
- 2. Current codes and standards, as well as sound land use practices, must be in use and enforced for new development and rebuilding in wildfire-prone areas.**
- 3. Fire departments for communities in the WUI must be prepared to respond safely and effectively to wildfire.**
- 4. Government must increase resources for vegetative fuel management.**
- 5. The public must understand its role and take action in reducing wildfire risk.**



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