



Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology

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Rural Sprawl Increases Risks To Wildland Firefighters Makes Firefighting More Dangerous, Fire-Lighting More Difficult

The report by the Sierra Nevada Alliance, *“Dangerous Development: Wildfire and Rural Sprawl in the Sierra Nevada,”* provides critical new information along with a grim warning about how poorly planned growth—rural sprawl—is increasing the number of homes and communities at risk from wildfire. Along with that increased risk to homes and their residents comes an increased risk to the health and safety of wildland firefighters who are charged with protecting homes from wildfires.

Rural sprawl into fire-prone wildlands combined with climate change due to global warming, the spread of invasive non-native plants, and hazardous fuel loads from past fire exclusion and commodity resource extraction, poses extreme challenges to wildland firefighters and fire managers. A single wildfire can simultaneously threaten hundreds of homes along its flame front, overwhelming the capacity of wildland and municipal firefighters. Rural residents should not assume that firefighters will always be available or able to successfully defend their homes from approaching wildfires.

Rural sprawl not only make it more risky and dangerous to fight wildfires, but also more risky and difficult to light controlled fires. Firefighters often ignite controlled fires during suppression operations to “fight fire with fire,” and ignite prescribed fires to reduce hazardous fuel loads and restore fire-dependent ecosystems before wildfires ignite. When homes are dispersed in sprawling developments, this greatly limits the ability of firefighters and fire managers to safely use fire for wildfire suppression, fuels reduction, or ecosystem restoration objectives.

FUSEE believes that the ability of firefighters to safely manage both prescribed and wildland fires has to be considered in the location, design, and construction of every new housing development. FUSEE's long-term vision is to recreate fire-compatible communities living safely and sustainably in fire-permeable landscapes. In a fire-permeable landscape where homes and communities are properly prepared, wildland fire is able to serve its natural ecological role but does not damage or destroy human-built structures. Through such mechanisms as land use and fire management planning, building codes, vegetation maintenance ordinances, and simple common sense, we can halt dangerous, fire-vulnerable rural sprawl, and relearn how to work safely and live sustainably with wildland fire.

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