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### **Rationalizing Wildfire Policy: Getting the Incentives Right**

Although warm, sunny spring days feel like a blessing after many cold, gray winter days, we are only a couple of months away from the start of the wildfire season when summer sun and warmth can feel like a curse that threatens our homes and communities.

Our collective strategy to cope with wildfire continues to be dysfunctional and costly. In general, both communities and individual citizens take a relatively passive and fatalistic view, hoping fire will not threaten them and, if the inevitable summer fires move towards them, expecting that firefighters will save them.

When the wildfires are burning towards communities and homes, our news media helps us stare in horrified fascination and awe. In that setting, we expect heroic efforts on the part of fire fighters and also expect our public fire managers to spare no expense in aggressive efforts to suppress the wildfire and protect all homes.

But the truth is that when climatic conditions for high-intensity wildfires exist, firefighters often are powerless to stop the spread of the wildfires. And once the wind-blown embers or flames enter the urban-wildland interface, catastrophe is always possible because the fuel supply and flammability of human settlements is often higher than that of the surrounding wildlands. Although properly prepared home sites and communities can withstand the passage of wildfires with limited damage, unprepared communities can convert what otherwise would be a beneficial natural disturbance into a dreadful unnatural disaster.

In fact unprepared residential sites threaten the lives of firefighters and reduce their effectiveness as political pressure forces them to cluster personnel and resources around those highly flammable home sites rather than focusing on managing the overall fire to reduce the damage and maximize the natural benefits that fire can bring to wildlands.

We **know** how to protect residential settlements. Simply replacing roofs with nonflammable materials and reducing the flammable vegetation within 30 feet of structures can increase the probability of homes surviving high-intensity wildfires by more than 90 percent. Despite this, each year our collective resources, totaling one to two billion dollars a year, are spent clustering around ill-prepared human settlements on the urban-wildland interface. Homeowners expect this heroic collective and costly effort whenever wildfire threatens, whether or not they, themselves, have taken the basic steps to make their homes more fire safe.

Fortunately Congress is showing some signs of doing more than simply increasing the size of the blank check for crisis response during the height of wildfire season or subsidizing more commercial logging on public lands under the pretense of reducing hazardous forest fuels. Congress, instead, is considering legislation that would try to modify the incentive system that both communities and homeowners currently face and get them, the people who inhabit the wildland-urban interface, to take more responsibility for their own safety, **before** wildfire threatens them.

The *Fire Safe Communities Act* creates a grant program to assist communities to develop new fire-resistant building codes and defensible space ordinances and then supports the additional costs to inspect and enforce those local codes. Local fire codes,

of course are not new; almost all communities have them, but codes focused on protecting against wildfires *are* relatively new, especially in ex-urban, rural communities.

The *Fire Safe Communities Act* would also provide incentives to individual homeowners to implement the *FireWise* guidelines developed by government and insurance industry scientists to increase significantly the likelihood that homes will survive wildfires. The federal legislation would set up a grant program to assist homeowners in retrofitting their homes and lots. Then, communities and homeowners who have taken these local steps to increase their ability to survive wildfires would receive higher levels of federal disaster compensation for home losses if wildfires do damage the community, supplementing private insurance to assure more complete coverage of the losses.

The *Fire Safe Communities Act* seeks to provide incentives to homeowners and communities to invest their own money to retrofit homes and maintain vegetation on their own private lands. Since that is the most cost effective method of preventing wildfires from damaging homes, the net result should be lower public and private costs associated with wildfires and their management and control.

In most forests and grasslands, fire is a productive and beneficial force. Good wildland management and fire management, ultimately, must find a way to reintroduce safely wildfire into our wildlands. We need wildfire-compatible communities living safely and sustainably in fire-permeable landscapes. Getting those who choose to live in these fire-dependent landscapes to take responsibility for building and maintaining their homes and home sites so that wildfires can pass through the surrounding landscape

without threatening a human catastrophe, is a vital part of any rational fire safety and fire management program.