

Fighting Fire Before It Starts

Officials Push Landowners to Clear Brush and Take Other Protective Measures

U.S. NEWS | Updated July 24, 2013, 7:36 p.m. ET

By Erica E. Phillips and Ann Zimmerman



Prescott firefighter Wade Ward stands this week at the site where 19 firefighters died battling the Yarnell Hill, Ariz., wildfire on June 30. Associated Press

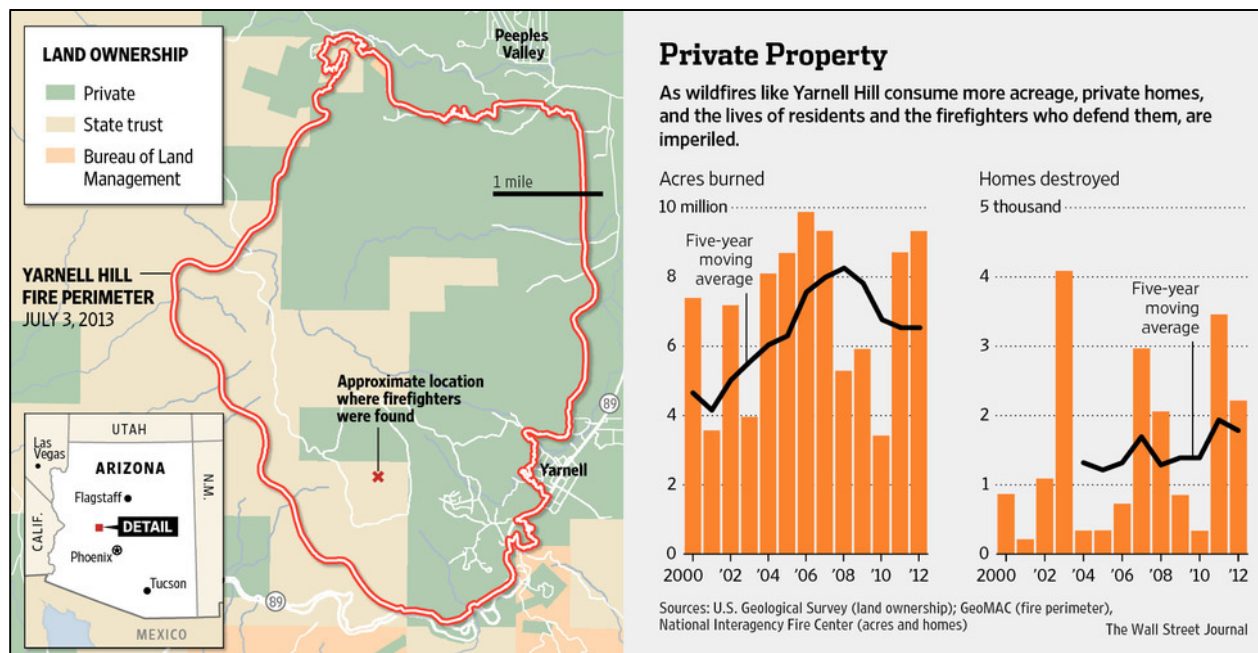
YARNELL, Ariz.—Many of the modest homes that once rested against a backdrop of rocky hills here are now mere concrete foundations, a few free-standing brick chimneys and piles of melted corrugated metal. But some say they could have been spared if more homeowners had cleared brush on their property.

The Yarnell Hill fire, which overtook this town late last month, took the lives of 19 elite firefighters from nearby Prescott's fire department and destroyed nearly 20% of the community's 600 homes.

Darrell Willis, chief of Prescott's wildland firefighting division, said Tuesday the dead firefighters' goal was to protect "life and property." They died traversing rocky terrain and high chaparral en route to Yarnell, where Mr. Willis said he believes they were planning to help protect burning homes.

As the West experiences another brutal fire season, local and federal officials are trying to boost efforts to clear brush from public lands. But much of the potential fire hazard is actually on privately owned lands. The Yarnell fire was largely fueled by brush on private lands: Of the total area burned, about 69%, or 5,694 acres, was privately owned, according to a report last week by the Pacific Biodiversity Institute, a conservation-research group based in Washington state.

Houses surrounded by so-called defensible space—cleared brush and trimmed trees—mostly escaped destruction, the report shows. But only 11% of the residents in the community took such preventive measures, a pattern that other fire-prone areas like Colorado are trying to reverse.



The National Fire Protection Association, an advocacy group that organizes efforts to secure property from the threat of fire, has seen a surge in interest since the Arizona firefighters' deaths and the Colorado fire last month that destroyed more than 400 homes, said program manager Molly Mowery.

The group's Firewise Communities program, which is co-sponsored by the U.S. Forest Service, the Interior Department and the National Association of State Foresters, lays out simple fire-mitigation plans for homeowners. Presently, 930 communities nationwide have implemented the program's standards.

Still, fire officials say persuading landowners to take preventive measures hasn't been an easy sell. Many homeowners enjoy the look of vegetation, even if it's flammable, and appreciate the privacy it affords. For others, particularly retirees on fixed incomes, the costs and physical demands of brush-clearing can be prohibitive.

Paul Ohlenbusch, a 73-year-old former professor, lives in a retirement community north of Austin, Texas, an area plagued by drought for several years. To protect his home from possible wildfires, he keeps his house gutters free of leaves and twigs, clears tree limbs from the roof and trims shrubs at least six inches from the house. While he tries to persuade neighbors to do the same, he said, "Many of them are in denial."

Speaking to reporters Tuesday at the site where the firefighters died, Mr. Willis said he hopes a lesson will be learned from the tragedy. "If all the communities across the Western United States had a priority on defensible space, if they were taking care of the property," Mr. Willis said, "we wouldn't have to put firefighters between homes."

The recent study of the Yarnell Hill fire found 89% of homes and other structures in Yarnell had been "in direct contact with trees or shrubs" before the fire. Of those, 30% burned, compared with only 5% of structures the institute determined were "fire-safe"—or "not in contact with trees, shrubs or foliage that could act as fuel."

As helpful as brush clearing and other defensive measures can be, said Arlon Rice, chairman of the Yarnell Fire Department's board, nothing can guarantee that the most extreme fires will spare a given home, as wind-driven flames and embers can leap large distances.

Kevin Boness, an Arizona district forester who worked on command operations during the Yarnell Hill fire, said, "There's only so much the government can do to protect private land."

That's particularly true in communities like Yarnell that aren't close to large forests, where thick foliage and underbrush can easily ignite. In rocky terrain, where chaparral and brush rises only 10 to 12 feet high, Mr. Boness said, "the expectation is that [a fire] won't be as dramatic."

According to the Yarnell Fire Department, 31% of the structures that were destroyed in the fire were uninsured. Other states are also at high risk for wildfires. A 2012 CoreLogic study of 13 Western states for insurers showed that California, Texas and Colorado had the largest number of homes at high risk.

After last year's record-setting wildfires in Colorado, Gov. John Hickenlooper created a task force to consider legislative measures to minimize fire risk and destruction in the state, where about three-quarters of development in forests is on private property. The task force is considering recommending legislation that would give the government the power to force homeowners who live in burn zones to mitigate fire risk, such as clearing flammable vegetation.

Most large insurance carriers in Colorado now require homeowners in high-fire-risk areas to create defensible space around their homes. "But insurance can't be the only answer," said Carol Walker, executive director of the Rocky Mountain Insurance Information Center.

During last month's devastating fire in Colorado, about 60% of the buildings survived in the communities where mitigation was widespread, said Bob Harvey, the fire chief of Black Forest.

The severity of this year's fire season, which has only just begun in California, has driven several communities around the country to undertake their own programs.