

El Dorado County town ripe for massive wildfire

By Phillip Reese, Sacramento Bee

Look down from a hill over Cameron Park, and you mostly see a lush canopy of trees. The trees conceal the 7,600 homes there, homes they shade, cool – and threaten.

“It just looks like a carpet,” said Cal Fire Battalion Chief Mike Webb. “When you add up all the conditions and lots, we certainly have a recipe for a bad day.”

Cameron Park sits on land that Cal Fire – the state Department of Forestry and Fire Protection – deems highly hazardous for wildfire, and it is a focal point as officials prepare for the imminent fire season. A plant preserve full of wildfire fuel overlooks the town 35 miles east of Sacramento.

Despite those risks, the number of homes in Cameron Park grew 30 percent during the last decade, largely during the construction boom.

The rest of the region also built heavily in wildfire hazard zones, adding about 17,000 homes to risky areas from 2000 to 2010, according to a Bee analysis of new census figures, housing permits and fire hazard maps.

While much of the growth occurred in suburbs like Cameron Park, homes also went up in the hinterlands. Builders in Grizzly Flats and Happy Valley, two El Dorado County communities far from population areas but close to thick national forest, erected 140 houses during the past decade.

In the North Upper Truckee area near Lake Tahoe, developers added 60 homes just before the Angora Fire ripped through in 2007, causing massive damage.

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