

Regional fire chiefs worry about structures near wildland

By Jeff DeLong, Reno Gazette-Journal

More people are moving into areas abutting wooded and brushy terrain of the wild, putting more lives and property at risk of wildfire in a situation made more dangerous by a warming climate.

Such was a central message issued to a convention of fire chiefs in Reno last week to discuss issues associated with fire danger in the so-called wildland-urban interface. The five-day conference occurred in a community where nearly 60 homes were destroyed by a pair of dangerous wintertime blazes within a two-month period and at a time a deadly wildfire was burning on the outskirts of Denver.

Expect more of the same in the years ahead, experts told the chiefs during a discussion of wildfire conditions of the future.

"We have a very dangerous situation on our hands," said Arthur "Butch" Blazer, former state forester for New Mexico and currently deputy undersecretary for natural resources and the environment for the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Decades of suppressing fire have resulted in overgrown forests ready to burn, while a warming climate is making for longer, larger and more intense fire seasons, attendees of the conference hosted by the International Association of Fire Chiefs were told.

Complicating that hazardous combination is the growing number of people moving into the urban-wildland boundary where the

risk of damaging wildfire is greatest, said Faith Ann Heinsch, a research ecologist with the U.S. Forest Service based at a fire sciences laboratory in Montana.

More than 9 percent of homes nationwide are now located within the wildland-urban interface, with the number rising to 50 percent in 19 states, Heinsch said.

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