

International

Rebuild or leave? Future uncertain for US communities in fire zones

'We'll never have enough fire engines to park in every driveway'

LOS ANGELES: Deadly blazes raging across the western United States have again destroyed thousands of homes nestled in forested areas this year — with months of the fire season still to come in a region perilously exposed to climate change.

With many insurers now refusing or charging exorbitant rates to cover at-risk houses, some homeowners are questioning what the future holds for their exhausted communities.

Populations of settlements built on the forested margins of cities — officially known as the wildland-urban interface (WUI) — have exploded in recent decades, and now total some 50 million households.

One example is Paradise, a town bordering



Remodeling would be expensive

Northern California's national forests which was devastated by the state's deadliest modern-day fire in 2018. Rebuilding from the inferno that claimed 86 lives had not even finished when it was threatened by another fire burning in a neighboring town this month.

Despite the inherent risk of living in settlements like Paradise, the idea of evicting citizens "is the last solution residents want to resort to and policymakers want to resort to, because it's so dramatic and so costly," said Gregory Pierce, of University of California Los Angeles. "But for some communities, it's the only answer for survival," the urban planning professor told AFP.

'Out in the wilderness'

So far this year, some 6,500 structures have been destroyed in California alone, according to CalFire, with massive devastation extending far into Oregon and Washington states up the Pacific coastline. But WUI housing has grown exponentially due to the region's "housing affordability crisis," said Pierce. California's real estate is among the nation's costliest, but it remains "cheaper to build new development in outlying areas than it is in core urban areas," he added. WUI housing boomed nationwide from 1990 to 2010, both in number of new homes (41 percent) and land area used (33 percent), according to the US Forest Service.



LOS ANGELES: Firefighters work the Bobcat Fire burns in the Angeles National Forest on September 21, 2020 in Los Angeles, California. The fire, which erupted on September 6 in the Angeles National Forest, has become one of the largest fires in Los Angeles County's history with over 100,000 acres scorched by the fire. — AFP

"We have communities that are building around canyons that have brush, that are tough (to access)," said Darrell Robert, a 20-year-old firefighter in Southern California. "I mean, everybody wants that beautiful home with the trees over the top and out in the wilderness — we get that." But the risks are high, he added.

Prescribed fires

There are many factors behind California's record fires. Besides overpopulation of the WUI, years of drought worsened by climate change have left endless acres of excess, dry vegetation.

For President Donald Trump, a climate change skeptic, poor forest management is the leading culprit. One management tactic is to deliberately light "prescribed fires" that remove the fuel that feeds wildfires

in a controlled way.

"Plans and practices like that can be very successful, but it's very, very difficult to do today because of the fact that there is a lot of people living out there," said David Shew, a retired California fire chief. "Can you guarantee that it's not going to escape its control and burn down somebody's house?" Shew agreed that evicting inhabitants would be a radical solution. And simply banning construction — as is done in flood-prone parts of the Mississippi Delta — is also problematic, because it is "much harder to predict" precisely which areas will burn.

Incentives

Another alternative would be to shift new housing stock to less flammable materials, said Shew. Reinforced walls, windows and roofs built from highly

fire-resistant products, and covered fireplaces, could even be applied to existing homes. The remodeling would be expensive, but could make the vital difference in surviving the next inferno, he added — and besides, there is no other easy option.

"We'll never have enough fire engines to park in every driveway," said Shew. Insurance companies — who have lost millions of dollars underwriting homes in fire zones, but are obliged to extend policies for 800,000 at-risk homes by California state law — could financially incentivize customers to make modifications to their properties.

"For people who are already living in harm's way, there aren't many options to get out without losing a big chunk of the value of your assets," said Amy Bach of NGO United Policyholders, which looks after the rights of insured homeowners. — AFP

Hair to the rescue as oil pollution blights coastlines

BRIGNOLES: In the town of Brignoles in southeast France, 40 tonnes of human hair are stacked in a warehouse — discarded locks sent in from salons far and wide under an innovative recycling scheme.

After a successful trial in the nearby port of Cavalaire-sur-Mer, the hair is destined to be stuffed into nylon stockings to make floating tubes that will line harbours to mop up ocean oil pollution. "Hair is lipophilic, which means it absorbs fats and hydrocarbons," said Thierry Gras, a hairdresser in Saint-Zacharie near Brignoles and founder of the project Coiffeurs Justes (Fair Hairdressers).

Awaiting the green light from labour inspectors and anti-pollution officials, Gras hopes to start large-scale production of

the tubes before year-end and so help fight against pollution. He plans to sell the forearm-length tubes, which can each absorb eight times their weight in oil, for nine euros (\$10.50) apiece.

At the Brignoles warehouse, paper bags are filled with two kilogrammes (4.4 pounds) of hair each, waste from thousands of participating hairdressers from all over France — including Gras's own — as well as Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg.

The bags are then sent to another site a few streets away, where formerly-unemployed people and school dropouts are paid to make the absorbent tubes. Gras plans to reinvest half of the sale price of the tubes in the employment centre.

According to the stylist, each hairdresser on average produces about 29 kilogrammes of hair waste every year, most of it ending up in the trash. Last year, scientists found that discarded human hair was likely to blame for a strange phenomenon of missing toes among Paris pigeons. The birds appear to get entangled in the dis-

carded locks, cutting off blood flow to their extremities.

While snipping away at a client's hair, Gras told AFP his appetite for fighting pollution was awakened in childhood by the 1978 stranding of the Amoco Cadiz tanker off France's Brittany coast.

For perhaps the first time ever, human hair was employed in the effort to mop up the more than 200,000 tonnes of spilled oil.

When he became a hairdresser later, Gras was shocked to discover there was no recycling facility for hair waste — which can also be used as fertiliser, isolation material, concrete reinforcement or in water filtration.

Gras thus came up with the idea of creating hair-filled oil absorbers, and in 2015 founded his association. It has some 3,300 contributing salons to date.

The tubes, Gras explained, "can be used in case of a serious oil spill, such as the one in Mauritius recently, but the idea here is to remove micro-pollution on a continuous basis" in ports. — AFP

Criminal 'clans' challenge Sweden's law enforcement

STOCKHOLM: Police in Sweden say they're struggling to control criminal "clans" exercising their own form of justice, amid an escalation of violent crime in what has long been a tranquil and safe country. With close family loyalties and little regard for the authorities, a few dozen criminal gangs now wield considerable influence over some of Sweden's disadvantaged neighbourhoods, say experts. Shootings, bombings and grenade attacks have become regular events in cities and towns across the country. Media outlets report on drug wars, blackmail, settlements of scores and witnesses too fearful of repercussions to testify.

"Have you seen the movie 'The Godfather'? Then you know what it's like," journalist Johanna Backstrom Lerneby, who wrote a book about one of Sweden's most infamous crime families, told AFP. Gang members tied to the family Backstrom Lerneby wrote about recently made headlines in Sweden when, during a feud with a rival gang in August, they set up makeshift roadblocks, stopping cars and asking to see passengers' ID cards.

Interviewed by broadcaster SVT on condition of anonymity, a young man involved in the car checks who called himself "Samir" said the controls were set up to "protect residents and children in the area". The feud came to a halt in late August — but not because police arrested any suspects. Instead, members of several gangs met at a Gothenburg hotel and agreed to end hostilities, effectively ending the strife overnight.

"It's very frustrating, because it is a good solution in the short term... but it was resolved in the wrong way," local police officer Fredrik Terje told SVT. "It's these criminal networks that reached a



STOCKHOLM: File photo shows people lay flowers and candles at the place where a twelve-year-old girl was shot dead at a petrol station in Hallunda in Botkyrka, south of Stockholm, Sweden on August 3, 2020. — AFP

peace deal and set the agenda, while the authorities stood on the sidelines," Terje added.

The problem of "clan gangs" has made headlines since early September, when deputy police chief Mats Lofving told Swedish Radio there were at least 40 family-based criminal gangs in Sweden. "Far from everyone wants to be a part of Swedish society," Lofving said, adding these families had come to Sweden solely for the purpose of committing crime, bringing with them their own parallel systems of government. Lofving also said these families were making their way into business and politics in order to wield more formal influence, primarily in disadvantaged suburbs, many of which have a large proportion of residents with immigrant backgrounds. — AFP

Belarus neighbours open doors to tech talent

WARSAW: With Belarus in upheaval, its neighbours are eyeing its tech sector in the hope of attracting the talent behind global successes such as calling app Viber and the game World of Tanks.

Since the mass protests against President Alexander Lukashenko began last month, Poland and the Baltic states have opened their doors to companies from the former Soviet republic's thriving IT sector.

Lukasz Czajkowski, head of growth at Poland's Software Development Association, said relocation was a "win-win" both for Belarusian IT workers and for Poland's economy. Poland has a booming IT sector that required an additional 50,000 workers in 2019, according to European Commission estimates.

Many Belarusian IT sector employees have openly supported and participated in the anti-Lukashenko protests, themselves fuelled by communication through social media. Czajkowski said it was unsurprising that some Belarusian startups would be thinking of moving.

"These people want change. They have contact with the outside world, work for Western clients and therefore travel. They earn more than most Belarusians, they have different aspirations," he told AFP.

Poland's Investment and Trade Agency has set up a new programme called "Poland: Business Harbour" offering legal and logistical assistance to Belarusian tech companies wanting to set up in Poland.

Renata Zukowska, a spokeswoman for the agency, said it was working with "10 big firms and dozens of smaller ones" that want to move some or all of their operations, but she declined to reveal which ones until completion. Despite a largely state-controlled economy dominated by farming and heavy industry, Belarus has managed to turn the legacy of a solid Soviet technical education into a thriving IT sector helped along by tax breaks.

Belarus's tech sector currently

employs around 60,000 people and represents some five percent of the country's economy, according to experts. In 2005, Minsk created a High Technology Park, quickly dubbed a "Belarusian Silicon Valley", where companies could receive additional incentives and protection from the perils of doing business in a post-Soviet environment.

But that all changed when some executives openly sided with the opposition in the run-up to and following Lukashenko's disputed reelection on August 9.

Mikita Mikado, founder of PandaDoc, a sales process software company, proposed financial aid for members of the security forces who wanted to switch sides.

Since then, the company has been raided and some of its managers have been arrested for fraud.

Baltic countries

Poland is not alone in trying to attract technical know-how from Belarus. The Baltic countries that were once part of the Soviet Union and are now EU members have also outlined a raft of new measures.

Kaspars Rozkalns, head of the Latvian Investment and Development Agency (LIAA), last week said that "29 companies are seriously thinking about moving, while 12 others have decided to move".

Lithuania has said it is in negotiation with 60 Belarusian companies, mostly in the IT sector.

One potentially influential figure is Valery Tsepikalo, a former government minister in Belarus who has switched to the opposition.

Tsepikalo is credited with overseeing the development of Belarus's tech sector and has now fled to Poland after unsuccessfully trying to register as a candidate against Lukashenko.

Tsepikalo, who has been touring neighbouring countries to drum up support for the opposition, has a gloomy outlook for the sector without fundamental political and economic change. — AFP