

Experts say urban sprawl, climate change hike wildfire risk

July 28 2018, by Sudhin Thanawala And Jonathan J. Cooper



In this Thursday, July 26, 2018 file photo, a structure burns as the Carr fire races along Highway 299 near Redding, Calif. In the last year, fires have devastated neighborhoods in the Northern California wine country city of Santa Rosa, the Southern California beach city of Ventura and, now, the inland city of Redding. Hotter weather from changing climates is drying out vegetation, creating more intense fires that spread quickly from rural areas to city subdivisions, climate and fire experts say. But they also blame cities for expanding into previously undeveloped areas susceptible to fire. AP Photo/Noah Berger, File)

A fire that started in a rural community in Northern California

underscored a new reality in the state when days later it suddenly roared through neighborhoods on the edge of the city of Redding: Urban areas are increasingly vulnerable to wildfires.

In the last year, neighborhoods in the Northern California wine country city of Santa Rosa and the Southern California beach city of Ventura have been devastated.

Hotter weather attributed to climate change is drying out vegetation, creating more intense fires that spread quickly from rural areas to city subdivisions, climate and [fire](#) experts say. But they also blame municipalities that are expanding housing into previously undeveloped areas.

"There are just places where there should not be subdivisions," said Kurt Henke, a former fire chief in Sacramento who now serves as a consultant to fire organizations. "We're not talking about a single family who wants to build a house in the woods. I'm talking about subdivisions encroaching into the wild land urban interface that put them in the path of these destructive fires."

Henke wants more funding from the state legislature to deploy firefighters to areas where conditions are ripe for fast-moving fires, so they can respond quickly if a blaze breaks out.

The fire that affected Redding—a city of about 92,000 people about 250 miles (400 kilometers) north of San Francisco—started Monday about 10 miles (16 kilometers) west of the city before sweeping Thursday through the historic Gold Rush town of Shasta and nearby Keswick. It then jumped the Sacramento River and took out subdivisions on the western edge of Redding.



This Oct. 14, 2017 file photo shows an aerial view shows the devastation of the Coffey Park neighborhood after the Tubbs swept through in Santa Rosa, Calif. In the last year, fires have devastated neighborhoods in the Northern California wine country city of Santa Rosa, the Southern California beach city of Ventura and, now, the inland city of Redding. Hotter weather from changing climates is drying out vegetation, creating more intense fires that spread quickly from rural areas to city subdivisions, climate and fire experts say. But they also blame cities for expanding into previously undeveloped areas susceptible to fire. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez, File)

Redding sits at the northern end of the agricultural Central Valley, surrounded by a scenic landscape. It has a downtown with a theater and wine bar and homes spread out in subdivisions.

Two firefighters were killed—one from the Redding Fire Department and the other a bulldozer operator hired for the fire. Hundreds of homes were destroyed and nearly 40,000 people were under evacuation orders.

Like the fires in Santa Rosa and Ventura last year, wind was a major contributor to the blaze's spread.

"It's ripping trees off the ground and throwing them across the street into homes," Chad Carroll, a spokesman for CalFire said Friday. "That's pretty strange and unusual."

Calfire Director Ken Pimlott described the fire activity at a news conference on Friday as almost like a "tornado."



This Oct. 13, 2017 file photo shows row of chimneys stand in a neighborhood devastated by the Tubbs fire near Santa Rosa, Calif. In the last year, fires have devastated neighborhoods in the Northern California wine country city of Santa Rosa, the Southern California beach city of Ventura and, now, the inland city of Redding. Hotter weather from changing climates is drying out vegetation, creating more intense fires that spread quickly from rural areas to city subdivisions, climate and fire experts say. But they also blame cities for expanding into previously undeveloped areas susceptible to fire. (AP Photo/Jae

C. Hong, File)

"What we're seeing not just here in Shasta County but literally statewide, fires that are growing exponentially," he said.

While touring Ventura County neighborhoods ravaged by fire last year, Gov. Jerry Brown said drought and climate change mean California faces a "new reality" where lives and property are continually threatened by fire.

The state is experiencing longer periods of warm temperatures and dry conditions that are making major fires nearly a year-round possibility, said Daniel Swain, a climate scientist at the University of California, Los Angeles.

"What we're seeing with some of the most dangerous fires is that they're spreading quickly, burning very hot or producing their own weather," he said.

Still, he agreed with other experts that say the destruction was also the result of more people living closer to fire-prone areas.



In this Oct. 14, 2017, file photo, the Tubbs wildfire burns behind a winery in Santa Rosa, Calif. In the last year, fires have devastated neighborhoods in the Northern California wine country city of Santa Rosa, the Southern California beach city of Ventura and, now, the inland city of Redding. Hotter weather from changing climates is drying out vegetation, creating more intense fires that spread quickly from rural areas to city subdivisions, climate and fire experts say. But they also blame cities for expanding into previously undeveloped areas susceptible to fire. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File)

"Over the years, we're putting more people in harm's way," he said.
"More people living in high fire risk areas than usual."

The fire in Santa Rosa in October 2017 destroyed nearly 2,700 homes, including in one neighborhood with expensive new subdivisions on a hillside at the edge of the city. The blaze in Ventura two months later destroyed more than 500 buildings.



In this Dec. 5, 2017, file photo, a wildfire threatens a home in Ventura, Calif. In the last year, fires have devastated neighborhoods in the Northern California wine country city of Santa Rosa, the Southern California beach city of Ventura and, now, the inland city of Redding. Hotter weather from changing climates is drying out vegetation, creating more intense fires that spread quickly from rural areas to city subdivisions, climate and fire experts say. But they also blame cities for expanding into previously undeveloped areas susceptible to fire. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File)

Jacque Chase, an urban planning expert at California State University, Chico, said U.S. government statistics show more homes are going up across the country in areas that sit on the boundary of [urban areas](#) and undeveloped land. That increases the risk of fires caused by human activity. It also means firefighters have to change their approach.

"They have to deal with actually saving lives and saving property," she

said.



In this Oct. 14, 2017 file photo, an aerial view shows the devastation of the Coffey Park neighborhood after the Tubbs wildfire swept through Santa Rosa, Calif. In the last year, fires have devastated neighborhoods in the Northern California wine country city of Santa Rosa, the Southern California beach city of Ventura and, now, the inland city of Redding. Hotter weather from changing climates is drying out vegetation, creating more intense fires that spread quickly from rural areas to city subdivisions, climate and fire experts say. But they also blame cities for expanding into previously undeveloped areas susceptible to fire. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez, File)



In this Dec. 5, 2017 file photo, smoke rises behind a destroyed apartment complex as a the Thomas wildfire burns in Ventura, Calif. In the last year, fires have devastated neighborhoods in the Northern California wine country city of Santa Rosa, the Southern California beach city of Ventura and, now, the inland city of Redding. Hotter weather from changing climates is drying out vegetation, creating more intense fires that spread quickly from rural areas to city subdivisions, climate and fire experts say. But they also blame cities for expanding into previously undeveloped areas susceptible to fire. (AP Photo/Noah Berger, File)

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