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At Risk Community Leads West in Action Against Wildfire

The buzz of chainsaws and the crashing of trees are the sounds of fire season in the picturesque Village of Ruidoso, N.M. At 7,000 feet in the Sacramento Mountains, narrow, winding roads lead to rustic homes nestled among thick clumps of pines and oaks. Canyons are steep, breezes are dry and foresters are nervous.

Just a few years ago, the cutting of trees was prohibited in Ruidoso. Today, the village is leading the nation with ordinances calling for mandatory thinning on private property, an effort applauded by State Forester Barbara Luna. "Thinning is more likely going to save their forests than not thinning. It's a whole paradigm shift for a lot of people."

Each summer, thousands come to this mountain town to escape the high temperatures of the surrounding desert, but the folks who live here are feeling a different kind of heat. Ruidoso has been identified as the number one community at risk for wildfire in the state. Smokey Bear District Ranger Buck Sanchez says the village is rated number two in all the West.

Mistletoe infestation, unprecedented bark beetle invasions and too many trees from a century of fire suppression add up to an unhealthy forest on the brink of total collapse said Charlie Denton of the Ecological Restoration Institute at Northern Arizona University. In addition, five years of drought has drained the mighty pines of their resilience.

"Our trees are dying all around us," said nearby Alto resident Sharon Stewart. She remembers watching the flames of the 2002 Kokopelli Fire roar down the highway she was standing on and explode the weak trees. That 900-acre fire raged through a canyon of upscale mountain homes, burning 29 and singeing hopes that nearby Ruidoso would remain unscathed. Today, charred tree trunks stand as grim reminders of what can happen when you live in the woods.

After the half-million-acre Rodeo-Chedeski Fire held the White Mountains of Arizona in a death grip the same year, Village of Ruidoso Forester Rick Delaco was on the phone with residents of the community of Show Low. Both communities felt the hot breath of a ravenous monster that had no qualms about how much property, homes, trees and even lives it inhaled.

Sanchez, Denton, Stewart and Delaco are all part of a group that meets regularly now in Ruidoso for the sole purpose of reducing the risk of wildfire in their community. Thora Padilla of the neighboring Mescalero Apache Tribe will tell you that fire knows no boundaries. "We're trying to do treatments throughout the mountain area so we can all benefit."

All around the community, branches and logs are piled up waiting to be picked up by village workers. Some piles are draped in clear plastic, which serves as a solar cooker of sorts, to kill deadly bark beetles that have destroyed hundreds of thousands of forested acres across the West. Residents apply for a cost-share program through the state to help pay for the expense of removing thickets of trees on their property. Some treatments are designed to mimic the structure of the forest before European settlers came in.

"We like these cuts because they leave big trees in clumps, open the canopy so the treetops aren't touching and allow sunlight to reach the ground," said Denton. Before long, as Denton points out, grasses, wildflowers and shrubs return to the forest that had become a monoculture of dark, sickly pines. And, the fire danger is significantly reduced.

Not everybody likes the "new" look of the forest. Bill Duemling of the state's forestry division says people come to Ruidoso because of the trees. "It is a challenge to train people to understand what a forest should look like compared to what it looks like now."

Still, the idea of thinning is catching fire. And, as smoke swirled high in the nearby Capitan Mountains from the Peppin Fire just last month, Ruidoso was reminded that there's a lot of work still to be done. "There's nothing like having a little smoke in the air to get people motivated," said Delaco.

In the very place where Smokey Bear was saved from a wildfire, the people here are learning how to read the signs of an unhealthy forest and advocating for treatments that will prevent catastrophic fire. For those who don't read the forest, other signs are hard to miss, like the ones along New Mexico's State Highway 48 that warn of very high fire danger.

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