

‘Obvious risk’ in city, wildfire veterans say

Top California firefighters offer Austin officials advice for fuel mitigation, evacuation routes



From left, Randy Denzer, Todd Derum and Dave Russell perform a risk assessment for residential areas near wildlands in West Austin on Tuesday. [LOLA GOMEZ/AMERICAN-STATESMAN]



This view shows an area at high risk of fire at Big View Sunset Park in River Place in Austin on Thursday. [LOLA GOMEZ/AMERICAN-STATESMAN]

BY HEATHER OSBOURNE HOSBOURNE@STATESMAN.COM

Two firefighters who managed three of California's most catastrophic wildfires said Austin should immediately begin to clear wildland areas and fireproof homes to avoid imminent, widespread devastation.

Chief Dave Russell and Chief Todd Derum, members of California Wildfire Incident Management Team 4, stood on a ridge overlooking West Austin from Turkey Creek last week, soaking in a scene they collectively described as "scary."

"There is an obvious risk here," Russell said during a risk assessment tour with city officials, including City Council Members Jimmy Flannigan and Alison Alter, whose wildlands in Districts 6 and 10, respectively, pose a significant wildfire risk; Carrie Stewart, division chief for the Austin Fire Department; and Justice Jones, wildfire mitigation program manager for AFD.

"You have homes right up against flammable vegetation," Russell continued, trying to speak above the sound of winds whipping toward him. "You don't need thousands and thousands of acres to burn. A wildfire can do a lot of damage in an afternoon here."

Russell said that on a windy day like last Tuesday, if it's hot and dry enough, a wildfire could travel up the area's hilly terrain as quickly as a football field a minute and devour entire communities within hours.

National Weather Service data recorded 20 to 30 mph wind gusts and temperatures as high as 73 degrees in Austin on Tuesday.

Residential neighborhoods, even if they are miles from the head of the fire, also could go up in flames because of traveling embers that enter homes through vents or by lodging under boards, according to Russell.

"We have homes built on a ridge here where there is a natural fire funnel," he said.

While Austin fire officials agree that a significant wildfire risk exists, Russell and Derum said the city and its residents could be doing more to mitigate fuels for the fire by thinning out dense vegetation through

controlled burns or other methods. The veteran firefighters also recommended creating practical evacuation routes and safe zones to shelter in place.

The firefighters said one of these steps is adopting a Wildland Urban Interface code, an international set of standards that, in its entirety, could hold landowners responsible for mitigating fuels and building structures with ignition-resistant materials.

The Austin City Council could vote this year to adopt a portion of the WUI code, which would require all new homes and businesses constructed near these wildland areas to use specialized materials that protect from burning embers.

However, the code would not apply to old construction, nor would it give the city full authority to mitigate fuels on any property.

The code would also require new communities to create evacuation routes.

The American Statesman attempted to speak with Austin fire officials about the adoption of the WUI code, but AFD spokeswoman Michelle Tanzola said the department would not publicly discuss it until vetting has been done and the City Council has the chance to weigh in.

However, Bob Nicks, president of the Austin firefighters union, disagrees with the department's decision. Nicks said fire officials have a duty to talk to the press and explain to residents what they are doing with the code and why.

"I find that to be a rather bizarre position for the Fire Department to take," Nicks said. "They don't have the option to shut our citizens, our taxpayers, out from what they are trying to accomplish with this code."

Until the plan for the WUI code is fully revealed and adopted, the two California visitors said, homeowners and landowners should step up to help with the issue.

Russell said communities can ask the Austin Fire Department to perform controlled burns in areas with dense vegetation. Wildfires historically would burn through the area and naturally mitigate fuels, but now that homes are in those areas, those natural processes have been interrupted.

“For 100-plus years now, we have done fire suppression and fire exclusion activities to make sure we stop those fires so they don’t burn down homes,” said Randy Denzer, a vice president for the Austin Firefighters Association. “Now we have so much built-up vegetation in these fire funnels.”

Russell said controlled burns would bring significant smoke into communities, but many areas in California put up with the inconvenience because of how much it decreases wildfire threats.

Landowners can also clear out excess vegetation on their own properties using heavy machinery or by hand, Derum said. Homeowners can reduce wildfire risks by placing vent shields on their structures and cleaning out storm gutters regularly.

Lastly, the men said, flat green areas like football fields or fire resistant buildings can be safe zones to ride out the fires if necessary. Communities can establish these safe zones ahead of time, so residents know where to go when a wildfire does occur.

Denzer said now that the wildlands are out of control, mitigation fuels in the areas most at risk appear overwhelming. However, he said the first step is making Austin residents aware of the risks and asking for their help.

“The fire department doesn’t have the authority to mitigate fuels,” Denzer said. “Once everyone is aware of the risks, we can all work together to try and do fuel mitigation. It all depends on how many people in one area say fuel mitigation is what they want to do.”