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Wildfire-risk panel readies game plan for Riverside County supervisors

By: KIMBERLY TRONE

The Press-Enterprise

Riverside County should limit home construction in fire corridors and establish incentives for property owners to transfer development rights to more suitable locations, a regional panel is recommending.

The panel of fire experts, planners, law enforcement officials and community representatives will make its recommendations formally to the Riverside County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday.

The recommendations include buying up land in fire-prone areas for permanent conservation, clustering developments with greenbelt buffers and ensuring homes are built on parcels to allow proper brush clearance. They also call for a more stringent plan review on projects within fire-severity zones.

Supervisor Bob Buster asked for the panel's formation after the 2006 Esperanza Fire killed five U.S. Forest Service firefighters while they

defended an unoccupied home in the San Jacinto Mountains.

Despite the fact that three fatal wildland fires have occurred in the Esperanza area within the past four decades, a new plan to build 150 homes in the mountains south of Banning is advancing.

Buster predicted future policies stemming from 18 months of work by the panel would change the mind-set of people who now live in fire-severity zones or plan to do so.

"It's not like living everywhere else. There are additional requirements to be part of these communities. The time has come to recognize important tools to reduce the extremely high costs of defending these areas against wildfire," Buster said.

The panel's recommendations come as the Board of Supervisors prepares a five-year update to the county's general plan, a document that

determines how growth will occur in unincorporated areas.

Sprawling across 7,300 square miles, Riverside County is home to dozens of fire-prone developments in densely forested mountains and rocky, chaparral-covered hills.

The general plan should recognize areas designated by the state as fire-hazard severity zones as well as county-designated hazardous fire areas, the panel said in its report.

Cal Fire/Riverside County Fire Chief John Hawkins, a member of the panel, called the recommendations "critically important to Riverside County policymakers."

Hawkins said the panel identified and focused on the four most important components of fire-hazard reduction: evacuation, education, enforcement and engineering.

But he said enforcing new rules on top of existing rules would require adequate staffing, from planning departments to field inspectors in fire and code-enforcement agencies. The panel is encouraging county agencies to standardize enforcement through a multiple-agency approach.

The construction industry will follow state guidelines requiring new homes in fire-prone areas to have roofs, vents, siding and decking that are more resistant to burning, said Borre Winckel, executive director of the Riverside County chapter of the Building Industry Association. It will also comply with other rules that the county may decide to impose, he added.

"The dialogue is ongoing, and there is a learning curve, of course," Winckel said. "It's not like I have flexibility to oppose the fire marshal or chief of fire."

Winckel said careful scrutiny would be given to the maps used to identify areas of potential fire hazards.

He pointed out that several maps are out-of-date.

Cal Fire/Riverside County Battalion Chief Steven Diaz said the maps used to designate fire-severity zones in areas of state responsibility have been updated. Local maps are being updated to reflect the realities of growth, he added.

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The Fire-Hazard Reduction Task Force will present its recommendations to the Riverside County Board of Supervisors.

When: 1:30 p.m. Tuesday

Where: Riverside County Administrative Center, 4080 Lemon St., Riverside

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Expand contingency planning by determining the best resident evacuation routes in suburbanizing wildland areas.

Identify specific locations where sheltering in place may be an option.

Expand the county's early warning notification system.

Expand fire prevention programs. Support and create new community fire safe councils.

Standardize enforcement processes within county agencies.

Develop policies that will direct growth away from high fire areas.

Amend the Riverside County land-use ordinance to require building setbacks and ensure compliance through effective plan reviews.

Source: Fire Hazard Reduction Task Force