California Wildfires

More houses are being built in wildfire-prone areas. Los Angeles has a plan to stop

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Even before the Eaton Fire destroyed thousands of homes, Los Angeles County was trying to balance the need for new housing with the risk of wildfires.

Josh Edelson/AFP via Getty Images

Months before the Eaton Fire tore through Altadena, Calif., destroying more than 9,400 homes and buildings, the community had already been debating a fateful question: are there places too risky for new housing to be built?

Like so many communities, Altadena had grown over decades with little consideration of the risk of wildfires. Houses spread steadily into the foothills, nestled against the dense, flammable brush of the San Gabriel Mountains.

In December, Los Angeles County officials considered a new land use plan, one that would control building decisions for Altadena and the surrounding area for decades to come. The plan sought to balance two major problems. To address a housing shortage, more density would be allowed in the interior of Altadena. To reduce the

danger from wildfires, new construction would be restricted in the foothills.

Some of the affected landowners pushed back, saying the plan devalued their property and their rights to use it. Those same tensions about where to build housing are playing out around the country, as hurricanes, floods and wildfires get more extreme as the climate gets hotter.

Building regulation decisions generally fall to local elected officials, who have to balance their constituents' concerns about land use with the reality of a national housing shortage and growing threat of extreme weather. As a result, few communities around the country have adopted strict development limits to reduce the risk of disasters. Now, as it picks up the pieces after the fires, Altadena will follow those new development rules as it rebuilds.

The danger of wildfires was well-known to Los Angeles County. California is one of a handful of states that has mapped where the highest risk areas are.
Ryan Kellman/NPR

"Nobody likes to hear about constraints but at the same time, do we want our neighborhoods to burn down?" says Jennifer Balch, professor of geography at the University of Colorado Boulder. "There are things that we can do and should be doing to mitigate that risk."

Altadena foreshadows a disaster

In the weeks after the Eaton fire, Nic Arnzen was running on little sleep. He was

searching for temporary housing after he and his family lost their Altadena home.

"It was completely gone," Arnzen says. "I keep telling people the fridge was gone. I don't understand how a fridge just disappears to dust."

At the same time, Arnzen had the whole community to think of. As vice chair of the Altadena Town Council, he and his colleagues were juggling the logistics of a disaster. Already, many residents were vowing to rebuild.

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"The focus needs to be on: what can we plan for now?" Arnzen says. "How can we know the danger we live in now, and try to improve it?"

Altadena had already been trying to plan for wildfires. Los Angeles County officials had been working on the West San Gabriel Valley Area Plan, a plan that would control building decisions through new zoning. (Altadena is an unincorporated area, so planning decisions are made at the county level.)

Boosting housing is one big focus. Los Angeles is one of the most expensive housing markets in the country and as a whole, the county needs to add more than 90,000 housing units, part of a state requirement. The plan rezones land to allow for higher density of buildings and apartments along Altadena's central corridors, where there's already access to transportation and services.

At the same time, properties on the outskirts of Altadena would be zoned for a lower density of housing, particularly areas labeled as "very high" risk of wildfires. That would limit the construction of new homes there, part of a larger county-wide policy to direct development away from places that are likely to burn.

The fires in Los Angeles County could be the most expensive wildfire disaster in history.
Ryan Kellman/NPR

"This is the example of why," Arnzen says, referring to the Eaton Fire. "To make our town safe, we do have to have some supervision. And we hate to dictate to anyone that: no, you can't develop even though you've been waiting forty years to do that."

Plan comes down to a vote

In December, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors heard that exact feedback. A group of residents who own property in the foothills registered their opposition during public comments at a hearing for the development plan.

"For us, the property is more than just land," said Altadena resident Joseph DiMassa.

"It's 50+ acres where we imagine buildings, homes for our children, grandchildren, and possibly even future generations. The downzoning of our property from 52 homes to two isn't just a number, it destroys the dreams we hold for our family's future."

CALIFORNIA WILDFIRES

Some Los Angeles homes made it through the firestorm. Here's how

Still, many of the public comments were in support.

"The prevailing sentiment in Altadena is one of endorsement," Victoria Knapp, chair of Altadena Town Council, testified at the meeting. "The plan will direct development away from the Altadena foothills and other high fire zones."

When it came time to vote, the county supervisors passed the plan. That means as Altadena rebuilds and potentially expands, zoning restrictions limiting growth in the foothills will be in place.

After the Eaton Fire, Joseph DiMassa's daughter, Cara, says her family's land in the foothills was burned, destroying a summer camp they run there.

"I love Altadena so much," she says. "And all of that really is gone and it's pretty heart-breaking."

Under Los Angeles County's new plan, development would be limited in the foothills of Altadena, where the wildfire risk is highest.

Mario Tama/Getty Images/Getty Images North America

Her family had opposed the new zoning plan because they felt it drastically limited the

housing that could be built on larger properties.

"We really feel like the county did not do a great job at taking a look at some of these really large parcels that are family-owned, that suddenly were becoming completely devalued," she says.

Now, with so much devastation from the Eaton Fire, Cara DiMassa is glad the zoning plan is in place.

"It gives us hope that our hillsides will be hillsides again and I certainly don't want to see huge developments go up," she says.

Tensions of housing needs and wildfire risk

By considering wildfire risk, Los Angeles County's land use planning is ahead of many other Western communities. County supervisors are also considering a new ordinance that would put even more restrictions on construction in risky areas. The county knows which areas to target because the state has mapped wildfire hazard zones. Other states lack those maps or are in the process of developing them, like Oregon.

Across the country, new construction is expanding into areas that are prone to burning, known as the wildland-urban interface. Around 32 million homes were built there between 1992 and 2015, according to one study.

"We're building into flammable landscapes and just ignoring the fact that we're building into flammable vegetation," Balch says. "And we are increasingly doing that, and it's not changing anytime soon."

Wildfires are also spreading more explosively, driven in part by climate change. A hotter, drier atmosphere pulls the moisture out of vegetation, making it more flammable. Balch and her colleagues found that between 2001 and 2020, there was a 400% increase in how fast fires grew in California.

"Fires are getting harder to fight," Balch says. "So we cannot expect to live in flammable landscapes, and firefighters are going to just come along and put out the ignitions in our homes. This is something we need to address well before the fire actually ignites."

Many communities around the country struggle with balancing the need for new housing with the growing risk from more extreme weather.
Ryan Kellman/NPR

Still, many communities are in desperate need of new housing and elected officials may not want to appear anti-growth. New housing also means an increase in local property taxes, a key source of funding.

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This scientist studies climate change. Then the Los Angeles fire destroyed his home

"Zoning laws and development regulations really do happen at local levels and so part of the challenge is: what are the incentive structures?" Balch says.

California legislators have attempted to address how communities build in wildfire-prone areas at a statewide level. In 2020, a bill was introduced to put new restrictions on developments in risky areas, requiring them to have adequate evacuation routes and to fund programs to clear flammable vegetation. It was vetoed by Governor Gavin Newsom, who cited the state's housing needs. Several similar bills have been introduced since then, but also failed.

"The biggest opponents were the builders and realtors," says Hannah-Beth Jackson, a former California state senator who authored the vetoed bill. "People wanted to just keep building and building. The bottom line is the climate is changing."

When communities build in wildfire-prone areas, there are also few rules about using fire-resistant materials in most states. Studies show that following wildfire building codes can improve the chances a home will survive a wildfire. California has passed those codes, which means many homeowners rebuilding in Los Angeles will have to meet them. But the majority of other states have not.

While the conversation to build or not build can be tense, Altadena's Nic Arnzen says, in light of the devastation his community is recovering from, it's worth having that conversation, no matter the pushback.

"To tell people no is a difficult thing to do because you care about them and they're your constituents," Arnzen says. "But you have to buffer their anger with your knowledge. And sometimes you have to, as I've done as a parent, you just have to say no and take the beating."

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