

California sets new building codes for areas vulnerable to fire

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When Ed Kanner decided to build a new home in the foothills just south of downtown Los Gatos, he chose an unusual roof. Steel, painted brown to blend in with the oaks nearby.

Originally the idea was environmental efficiency - steel reflects heat and will keep the house cool. But

it also has another benefit, fire safety. Starting Tuesday with new statewide building standards, fire-safe materials are about to become a lot more common around California.

"If there's a fire, stuff up here goes up fast," said Kanner, a CPA who also didn't mind a Los Gatos rule that he also install fire sprinklers. "I think I'm not only saving my own life, but probably somebody else's."

As wildfires burn across California this summer, the new codes will include some of the strictest standards in the nation for people constructing new homes in high-fire areas from the Oregon border to San Diego and the Sierra to the Santa Cruz Mountains.

The rules require the highest-rated roofing materials: double-pane tempered windows so the glass doesn't shatter in heat; fire-resistant materials for decking and siding; and mesh screens over attic vents to repel flying embers, a common way firestorms spread.

"We have been looking at how we can make houses more resistant to fire. Embers are the real culprit," said Ernylee Chamlee, chief of wildland fire prevention engineering for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

State's

The new building rules are part of a two-pronged state strategy following historic blazes in 2003 that killed 24 people and burned 3,600 homes in Southern California.

The strategy is simple. It is politically impractical to ban all construction in fire-prone areas - just as it would be to ban all construction in earthquake hazard zones. So state authorities hope instead to

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reduce the chances of homes burning once fires start.

The other component requires rural homeowners to clear brush and trees 100 feet around their homes, rather than 30 feet, the previous standard. Although Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed that "defensible space" law in 2005, state and local fire departments have written almost no tickets for violators. But that's changing, too. Fines go up to \$500.

"This year, we will be more aggressive. If necessary, we will take enforcement actions to see that the work gets done," said Cal Fire director Ruben Grijalva.

"Defensible space doesn't mean clear-cutting everything down. It means thinning. It means being lean, clean and green."

Both the building and thinning rules affect roughly two-thirds of the land in Santa Clara County.

In particular, property in the foothills east of San Jose, Morgan Hill and Gilroy is affected, along with forested land all along the Santa Cruz Mountains from the Lexington Basin to Los Gatos, and up the Peninsula.

Conflict over rules

The building rules - specifically, chapter 7A of the California Building Code - were developed by a task force of government, industry and environmental groups, but they have sparked some controversy.

Homeowners in Plumas County grumbled about overly aggressive state bureaucracy. Some residents in Woodside have been concerned that towns might expand them to remodeling jobs, or insurance companies might raise rates.

At Lake Tahoe, property owners rushed to get

applications in before Jan. 1, when the rules took effect there.

"Every year, they need to find things that will 'improve structures,' " said Stephen Clark, a Saratoga architect. "Some of it is damn good research. Some of it is to keep their jobs. But most of this is worth it. If push comes to shove, this is worth it."

Fire-resistant materials generally cost more than traditional ones. How much the new rules will add to the price of a new home is unclear.

On average, they should increase costs by \$1,800 a home, according to Cal Fire and the California Building Standards Commission.

Clark said they might add perhaps 10 percent to the cost of a new home.

'Small price to pay'

"People want to live in the mountains and in these high-risk areas. This is a small price to pay," said Dave Walls, executive officer of the building standards commission. "With these new codes, you are buying time for firefighters. It is another kind of insurance for your home. You might even be buying yourself time to escape."

The new building codes will be enforced in city and county planning departments when people submit plans for new homes. The brush-thinning rules are typically enforced by local and state fire crews, who drive around inspecting risky areas every spring. And exactly where do the rules apply?

Both affect people living in two primary areas. The first, which makes up about one-third of California, is known as the "State Responsibility Area," or SRA. These are the rural locations where Cal Fire has the

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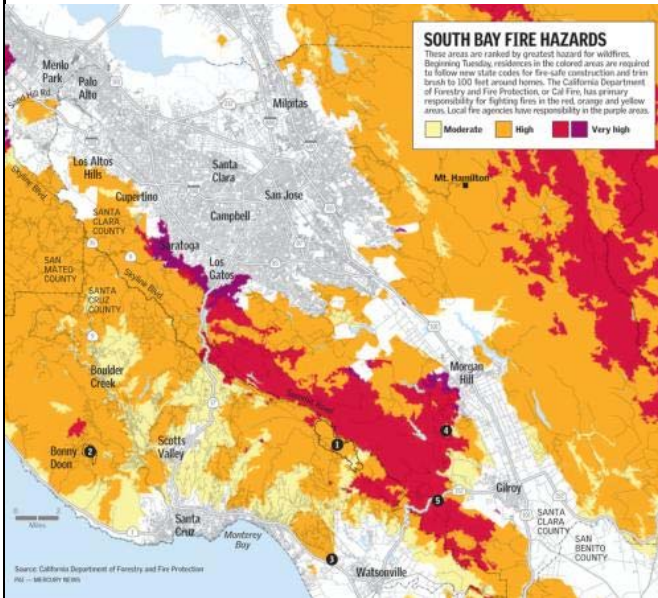
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primary responsibility for fighting wildfires.

New maps that Cal Fire released last year rank the hazards as yellow, orange or red, based on



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computer mapping of slope, vegetation, rainfall and the ability of embers to drift. The tougher building standards apply to all areas in the SRA zone, and took effect Jan. 1.

The other place the new rules apply is known as the "Local Responsibility Area," or LRA. These areas are within city limits, and local firefighters are the first responders. They include places like the hills adjacent to Los Gatos, Saratoga, Woodside, Oakland and other cities. Here, the new rules take effect Tuesday, but only in the red, or highest hazard, areas.

Because the new building codes only affect new homes, they will take time to have an effect.

However, experts say, they will eventually make California safer, particularly when combined with the new thinning rules.

"Typically, people don't think their house is going to catch on fire," said Jenn Viane Riese, executive coordinator of the Santa Clara County FireSafe Council, a non-profit group.

"They think nothing happened last year so it won't happen this year, until they wake up at 3 a.m. when their neighbors are honking horns and the flames are 100 feet away."

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

For more about thinning brush, go to www.sccfiresafe.org. For details of the new building codes, see www.fire.ca.gov/fire_prevention/fire_prevention_wildland_faqs.php

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