

# Preparing Pitkin County for increasing wildfire risk



**Jeffrey Woodruff**

*Guest Commentary*

**A**s we frolic in what could be the largest storm of the season, I can't help but notice how good it feels to smile at my neighbors as our skis graze across fresh powder on Campground, laugh with young kids as we throw snowballs at each other and watch with joy as the moisture soaks into the sagebrush, Gambel oak and aspen roots.

At the same time, the persistent drought and lowest snowpack ever recorded in Colorado's history has many of us looking ahead to what could be another record-breaking wildfire season. And as nearly every homeowner knows firsthand, the risks, and very real impacts, associated with wildfires are directly translating to rising costs in homeowners insurance.

The good news is we are acting at multiple levels to benefit our communities, our homes and our wallets. At the state level, the Wildfire Resiliency Code Board came together with diverse representation — including the Aspen Fire Protection District, large-scale homebuilders, state departments, county commissioners and wildfire experts — to develop the state's first wildland-urban interface code. Over two years, the code board met with industry representatives, code experts, the insurance industry and dozens of jurisdictions. The code board examined the codes adopted by neighboring states and improved on what they had previously adopted, incorporating the latest in structure and site hardening for the health, safety and welfare of all Coloradans.

To complement the code, the code board also developed a statewide map that illustrates local wildfire risk in response to the diverse conditions across Colorado's landscapes — from grasslands to mountainous terrain. Throughout the two years of developing the code and the map, cost, insurability and life safety for both homeowners and emergency response were paramount in our decision-making process. The code and statewide map will be updated every three years to adapt to what we learn and how conditions change on the ground.

What does this mean for us here in Pitkin County? The Board of County Commissioners is reviewing the code, and if

adopted, the code will go into effect in late April. The updated code is prospective; it applies to new construction and significant remodels or alterations of 500 square feet or greater. While the metrics and our decision-making are focused on residential construction, the code would also apply to new commercial buildings.

Many of the structure requirements should be familiar to those who have designed and built in Pitkin County. Since 2006, the county's land use code has had provisions for site and structure resilience. The state's model code both includes our existing standards and improves upon them by including, for example, a roof covering or assembly that is Class A, firestopping between the roof covering and the roof deck, walking surfaces like decking with an approved noncombustible material and the establishment of a structure ignition zone protecting at least 5 feet from a home. This 5-foot zone reduces or eliminates firebrand (ember) ignition and direct flame impingement with the structure, deck, stairs and accessory buildings.

While the code addresses individual wildfire risk, there is much work needed at a neighborhood and community scale. The Roaring Fork Valley Wildfire Collaborative, in partnership with the town of Snowmass Village, was awarded \$850,000 to improve the town's wildfire resiliency from the state's Natural Disaster Mitigation Enterprise Fund — a fund that Pitkin County advocated for back in the 2021 legislative session. Also this past year, the Roaring Fork Fire Rescue Authority was awarded nearly \$540,000 to also address fire mitigation from this same fund. Community-scale intervention is needed, and our communities and partners are leading the way.

We also need to improve our response for when wildfires do happen. While states like California have a fleet of 16 Sikorsky Firehawk helicopters, with professional firefighting crews, Colorado has some catching up to do. We still have not seen a Firehawk stationed on the Western Slope. Your elected officials and fire chief have advocated to the Division of Fire Prevention and Control to provide additional air support and specialized pilots and trained

ground teams. In lieu of state support, especially as the state faces a nearly \$850 million budget shortfall, Pitkin County, the city of Aspen and the Sardy Field Fire Department stood up a SEAT (single-engine air tanker) at Aspen-Pitkin County Airport, which releases 820 gallons of water, whereas a Firehawk can release 1,000 gallons of retardant. While this is only a first step, we cannot wait for others to act. If there is a gap, we will make progress by implementing the most cost-effective solutions that prioritizes our residents' safety and our landscapes.

Finally, while the code we worked on at the state level and are considering locally addressed wildfire, the code board did not have the authority to address hail protection. The Colorado Division of Insurance reviewed insurance premiums and found that hail accounts for anywhere from 26% to 54% of premiums statewide. So today in the Roaring Fork Valley, homeowners are paying for exposure to hail risk when there is close to zero risk in our communities. We are working with the Division of Insurance to rectify this gap in code this state

legislative session, which should directly benefit our residents.

As nearly every one of us finds a way to enjoy the fresh snowflakes, we also have the opportunity to protect our properties. For those of us who aren't planning to add on but want to reduce our risk proactively, both the Aspen Fire Protection District and the Roaring Fork Rural Fire Protection District provide home assessments, with curbside reviews of structures and landscape management. For those who are considering a remodel or new construction, or those in the industry, we encourage you to stay engaged throughout this process, get familiar with the new requirements, and consider providing public comment at the first reading on Feb. 25 or the second reading on March 25. By acting today, we can reduce our individual, neighborhood, community and statewide wildfire risk. And the time to act has never been more important.

*Jeffrey Woodruff is a Pitkin County commissioner and served on the Colorado Wildfire Resiliency Code Board.*



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