

2020 CENSUS DATA: WILDLAND URBAN INTERFACE

# WILDFIRE, WILDLIFE RISKS INCREASE FOLLOWING EXODUS TO RURAL AREAS



The Canyon Bluff apartments in west Spokane are located in an area that is part of the wildland urban interface.

TYLER TJOMSLAND/THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

As more people leave urban life, consequences grow where natural and human worlds collide

By Laurel Demkovich  
THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

TRI-CITIES – Out past the urban centers of Seattle, Tacoma and Spokane and toward the rural areas of central and Eastern Washington is an area of land not quite uninhabited and not quite bustling – the wildland urban interface. It’s the area where undeveloped land meets developed land, where buildings meet forests and fields. As more workers find opportunities to do their jobs from home and rural areas receive access to high-speed internet, more people are moving out of city centers and into these areas, sometimes bringing with them a number of unintended consequences.

Wildfire risks, run-ins with wildlife and dwindling resources are some of the effects that could come from more people moving into undeveloped areas.

And yet, it’s the fastest-growing type of landscape in Washington, said Ashley Blazina Cooper, Department of Natural Resources environmental justice and Western Washington forest

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health manager.

From 1990 to 2010, the size of the state's wildland urban interface grew about 190 million acres, almost 297,000 square miles, larger than the state of Texas. The number of homes grew by about 41%. Almost 99 million people live in the area, and more than 46 million homes in 70,000 communities are now at risk of wildfires, according to the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the U.S. Fire Administration.

Although there isn't exact data on how those numbers have changed since 2020, census data shows counties with a mix of rural and urban land in Washington have seen growth in the past 10 years.

Franklin County's population grew by almost 24%, the largest population change in Washington. Its neighbor Benton County also grew by about 18%.

Other central Washington counties, such as Douglas, Grant and Adams, grew more than 10%. Chelan, Kittitas and Whitman counties grew by almost 10%.

Most of the people moving into these areas have never lived in rural areas before, said Mark Billings, professor at Washington State University's School of the Environment. Many of them don't know how to live on that landscape and keep themselves safe.

"There's probably a percentage of people moving into the (wildland urban interface) that shouldn't be," Billings said.

### Wildfire risk

Wildfire danger is increasing due to climate

change and more than 100 years of fire suppression, Billings said. At the same time, the number of people living in harm's way is rising.

"Anybody who's moving into the (wildland urban interface) needs to understand that they're taking over the responsibility of living with wildfire," Billings said. "There's no escaping it, and at some point or another they will be affected."

One of the biggest concerns with people moving into these areas is that it changes the dynamics of wildfires there, Cooper said.

Houses often are made of wood, and they have a different way of burning than a tree would, she said. How likely a house is to burn depends on a number of factors, including the density of development or which direction the house is facing.

"The (wildland urban interface) isn't necessarily synonymous with wildfire risk, but building a house in the WUI puts that house usually at a higher risk," Cooper said.

Having a house in these areas can also make it difficult to put out fires, Cooper said.

Firefighting resources often prioritize areas with human lives and property at stake, Billings said. That often means more expensive firefighting.

"The more people that are in harm's way, the more resources we need to protect them," Billings said.

In recent years, the number of fire starts has plateaued, he said, but the fires that do start tend to be bigger and more problematic because they threaten human habitat.

There's a number of

things people can do to protect their property and make it more defensible against fire, Cooper said.

She suggested looking at historical photos of what the forest used to look like around their house. Most homes are going to have to do some type of thinning on their property to make their space more defensible.

If they are building a home, consider installing metal roofs or metal doors, and ensuring there's no vegetation around the first 5 feet of the house. If they are buying a home, they can ask previous homeowners or real estate agents what they recommend to keep their home fire safe.

It's also important to look at evacuation routes, Cooper said. A lot of developments only have one way in and out, so it's important to take that into consideration when moving to a place at risk for wildfires.

"There is a lot of risk that goes into that, and they should be aware of all the things that make their home safe before moving to one of these areas," Cooper said.

Billings also said people should become familiar with which institutions in their community deal with fire, whether that be volunteer fire departments, state agencies or federal agencies. In some areas, there is no dedicated fire department or formal fire protection, he said.

Ken Bevis, Department of Natural Resources stewardship wildlife biologist, said people who are new to living next to wildland should reach out to the department's small forest landowner office to learn how to take care of their land and make it more de-

fensible.

The Washington State University Extension Forestry Program offers a planning class for people who want to learn how to better care for their land, he said.

### Wildlife

Human presence is "a mixed bag" for wildlife, Bevis said.

More development and a larger human presence generally affect larger animals more than smaller ones, as human activity can repel animals that would otherwise freely move across the landscape, he said. People are scared because they don't expect it, but they move into a neighborhood where wild animals normally exist.

There is often "a very low tolerance" for large animals, such as bears or cougars, Bevis said.

Once they start interacting with humans, "it's usually a matter of time before they are killed," he said.

Smaller animals are the ones that often cause more nuisance for homeowners.

Bevis said he encourages homeowners to create habitat complexity when doing land management. By planting shrubs or rose bushes, for example, you can benefit smaller wildlife by providing them a habitat.

"Typically, we humans think of our development as just ours, but really, wildlife looks at it as their habitat," said Michael Atamian, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife regional biologist.

Some animals can't take advantage of the development, so it pushes them out. Others, such as pigeons in large cities, move in.

Atamian said there's no specific data that shows

there has been more wildlife sightings in Spokane in recent years, but anecdotally, he has heard more people in the area reporting sightings.

Some of that increase is due to more newcomers, he said. Traditional rural landowners might not report a sighting that someone who's just moved into the area and never seen certain types of animals before would.

In recent days, the department has seen a lot of calls on porcupines, which can be problems for pets, Atamian said. They also see a good number of calls about deer.

Atamian said there isn't a lot of data that shows there's been an increase in wildlife conflict with humans or livestock, but "as you put more people out on a landscape, there's more chance for conflict," he said.

To avoid conflict, Atamian encourages homeowners to secure their garbage, feed their pets inside, keep their pets inside during twilight hours and generally give wildlife their space.

Anytime there is a concern, Atamian said residents should call the Fish and Wildlife department.

There is a section of the state building code that is now tied with the international wildland urban interface code, which city planners, fire marshals and building code officials are required to use. It says that any new construction built, or anything that is to be retrofitted in the wildland urban interface, should follow certain portions of the code to ensure that they are fire resistant.

"That is something that is definitely an ongoing process because a lot of counties don't necessarily

have the means to do that," Cooper said.

For example, one of the requirements is that all new buildings use fire-resistant roofing materials, but many counties don't have a means to track that.

It's important to figure out who the community trusts and use those people to try and solicit change, he said. For example, if a community trusts their local fire department but not their state government, it's important that those people are the go-between the state or federal agency and the local community.

The number of large fires in the western U.S. doubled between 1984 to 2015. Though each year is different, data from the National Interagency Fire Center shows the number of acres burning has become consistently higher in the past 20 years nationwide.

It has become all too common for entire towns to burn, such as Malden, Washington, or Paradise, California.

As fires continue to worsen, communities toward the edge of the wildland urban interface should be aware of their wildfire risk, Billings said. Many of those people probably don't think about wildfires on a regular basis but could soon become more susceptible to big fires.

"It's going to become more common that towns and cities that we didn't think of as being in danger of wildfire are in danger of wildfire," Billings said. "You're going to start seeing them burn. That's scary."

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