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◉ Jun 17, 2007 7:16 pm US/Mountain

La Plata To Use Database To Help Combat Wildfires

(AP) DURANGO, Colo. La Plata County, with thousands of homes in the red zone, is setting up a database to identify wildfire risks in various neighborhoods.

"Longtime firefighters have a lot of knowledge in their heads, but there's been no attempt at systematic, electronic storage of such data. When firefighters leave, the information goes with them," said Bill Ball, whose Fort Lewis College office of Community Services is leading the survey.

The county plans to survey 8,000 homes in wildfire-vulnerable homes over the next two years to build a database that will help firefighters, the Durango Herald reported Sunday.

Ball said making details instantly available could reduce risks.

A recent pilot survey of 700 homes in the Forest Lakes subdivision north of Bayfield showed a wildfire would create very dangerous conditions.

"Forest Lakes is a high-risk wildfire area. The subdivision is south-facing with steep hillsides, heavy vegetation and closely packed houses," said Karola Hanks of the Upper Pine River Fire Protection District. She coordinated the survey.

The new survey will include two-member teams from the Southwest Conservation Corps equipped with hand-held computer, camera and GPS receiver, spending about 20 minutes at each house. They will study access, proximity to water, the type and density of vegetation, topography, home/roof construction materials and the amount of defensible space around the home.

Homeowners will be notified of the results, but the information will not be shared with real estate agents, home appraisers or insurance companies.

"Information won't be used, either, for 'black coning,' letting a building burn if it appears it can't be saved," Ball said. "It's more likely that the survey will tell firefighters what they have to do to save the structure."

Prepared for cbs4denver.com by Matthew J. Buettner, Web Producer.

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