

One lightning strike.
That's all it takes.
A SINGLE MOMENT

SOMEWHERE, THE NEXT FIRE IS WAITING TO HAPPEN

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BIG BUG MESA

It could have been Breezy Pine.

Like Yarnell before lightning sparked a fire that swept through it last week — and like dozens of towns and summer enclaves carved into Arizona's wooded hills — the Breezy Pine subdivision is a mountain retreat.

It's also highly flammable. A lightning bolt at this spot southeast of Prescott and the Granite Mountain Hotshots could have been scraping firelines on this mountain instead of making their last stand at Yarnell.

The unincorporated canyon village just under the cusp of Big Bug Mesa is the definition of the danger zone that firefighters call "wildland-urban interface." It's rugged country at 6,700 feet elevation, and its one access road is lined with the red-barked manzanita shrubs that Yavapai County forest-fuels specialists call "gasoline on a stick."

The 125 or so homeowners who live there, many retirees or metro Phoenix workers with retirement dreams, know the flames could come.

Forest Service data show that a wide swath of Arizona — from the upper western corner almost to the eastern edge — is at risk of a difficult-to-contain wildfire. At the same time, funding for preventing and fighting the fires wanes. On Friday, U.S. Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., said that draconian federal spending cuts could affect those resources even more. That comes as forests and brambles across the region become ever thicker with powerful fuel for wildland blazes.

"It's just kind of a fact of life," said Jim Pressley, a 44-year-old Peoria man who hopes to retire at his family's wooden, 1,700-square-foot cabin. He and his sons have raked pine needles and cleared brush. He might need some prodding from fire officials to remove a lovely

spruce that drapes over his deck.

Forestry experts in Arizona focus most of their fire-prevention efforts and attention on ponderosa forests like the one around Breezy Pine because their dense growth fuels fast-moving crown fires. The Wallow Fire of 2011 and Rodeo-Chediski Fire of 2002 torched more than a million acres of pine forest between them.

In 2009, the State Forestry Division compiled a "Communities at Risk" list that included 192 towns and developments. Of them, 80 were considered high risk from wildfires because of their encroachment into the wildland-urban interface.

The high-risk list includes cities such as Flagstaff and Prescott, and small communities such as Congress. It does not include Breezy Pine or, for that matter, Yarnell, although both have since been covered by a Yavapai County fire-prevention plan.

The plan, updated last year, states that about a third of the homes in the wildland-urban interface have undergone clearance work to create defensible space, with a quarter-million cubic yards of wood removed.

Yavapai County is growing — up by about 25 percent, to 211,000 people, between the 2000 and 2010 censuses. The forest, for all its risks, is a draw.

"I wouldn't trade it for the world," said one of Pressley's Breezy Pine neighbors, Pam Camacho, 50. She spends half the year in Phoenix and half here, in a home well-protected by a gravel flat on one side but directly under a steep slope of ponderosas on the other.

"That's why you have insurance and just hope for the best," she said.

"You buy a place like this and you think about (fire)," Pressley said. "But then you stick your head in the sand and say, 'Well, everybody else is doing it.'"

Disaster waits

In May 2012, some of Pressley's neighbors frantically drove 7 miles up Poland

Junction Road's gravel, rising from desert scrub past dense chaparral to their former mining camp notched amid the ponderosa pines and Gambel oaks. They were racing the Gladiator Fire, burning to the south near Crown King, to claim photos and keepsakes.

In their faces: a prevailing southwesterly wind aligned perfectly with the funnel of their canyon.

They were spared. The fire turned back several miles away.

"It's just a disaster waiting to happen," said Gary Roysdon, fuels-reduction coordinator for the volunteer Prescott Area Wildland Urban Interface Commission.

He's trying to ensure it doesn't happen. And after Yarnell Hill and Gladiator, a blaze a California hotshot crew barely escaped, so are the people of Breezy Pine.

The community conducted a fire-safety day in May and is completing paperwork to become Yavapai County's 24th Firewise community. It's a designation that requires a commitment by the villagers to spend \$2 per person each year hacking brush and trees around their homes. With it, the area will become eligible for grant money to help remove wood. Yarnell and Peoples Valley were not Firewise communities.

The Prescott Area commission is doling out a \$500,000 grant from the state for use over three years, and Roysdon thinks he might be able to get \$15,000 or \$20,000 for Breezy Pine.

Communities have to fight for limited cash. For 2013, the U.S. Forest Service sent \$1.5 million to Arizona to distribute in competitive fuel-reduction grants. A deputy state forester last week estimated that at least 1 million acres need attention, at a cost of \$400 to \$1,000 per acre, depending on whether it is cleared with a controlled burn or thinned with heavy equipment.

There are other funds, but apparently no single agency monitors how the money is distributed and spent.

The state got \$8 million in federal economic-stimulus money four years ago to reduce hazardous fuels such as pine needles, dead trees and other organic materials that help fire spread. More than half, \$4.5 million, went to the White Mountain Apache Tribe's forest-restoration program; another \$2.2 million helped the tribe develop a nursery and do ecosystem restoration after Rodeo-Chediski. Three other projects were in Yavapai and Navajo counties.

The state also issues grants from its Cooperative Forestry Fund to help with pre-

vention as well as firefighting. It was not immediately known how the money has been allocated in recent years.

The State Forestry Division this year has a \$7.2 million budget, with \$4 million earmarked for fire suppression. It is unclear how much of the remainder, if any, goes toward preventative efforts.

Yavapai County, which includes Yarnell, is among the most fire-conscious in the state. But even there, hazard reduction has never kept pace with a forest that grows thicker every year. There are 7,500 homes with defensible space in Firewise communities forming a semicircle around Prescott, wildland urban interface commission chairwoman P.J. Cathey said. But she thinks at least 10,000 more homes need it.

Fuel holds the key

Arizona's persistent drought, coupled with dead or dying trees and brush and the risk of human-caused fires, means the long-term threat is high. Fuel is the key, said Bruce Greco, outreach director for the Ecological Research Institute at Northern Arizona University.

"There are areas of Arizona that have very dense, overstocked areas of vegetation, particularly with ponderosa pine," he said.

In the case of Yarnell and many areas of Yavapai County, thick stands of chaparral are perpetual risks, said Pat Graham, state director of the Nature Conservancy in Arizona.

Controlled burns can help clean up pine areas, but they're often dangerous in chaparral, Graham said. Manzanita and creosote are especially oily.

"They tend to explode," he said.

And clearing brush isn't a one-time chore. Chaparral returns almost instantly.

"It's kind of like wiping your fanny with a hoop," said Roysdon, the Prescott-area fuels-reduction coordinator. "There's no end to it."

Roysdon is 80, an Oklahoman with a handlebar mustache who retired near Prescott after an electronics career in Southern California. Retirement finds him working about 40 hours a week assessing and attacking fire hazards with rented or donated crews.

This spring, he noticed a lot of brush and trees awfully close to homes in Yarnell. The U.S. Bureau of Land Management had worked to reduce fuels around town, he said, "and the people were aware. But there wasn't much activity by individual homeowners."

There's no forcing the issue, he said.

It's private property, and if people want trees and shrubs, they can keep them. Retirement areas like Yarnell may suffer if owners can't do maintenance.

The tragedy of the Yarnell Hill Fire not only took the lives of 19 men, it also took something tangible out of Roysdon's crusade. Wood-chipping crews cost hundreds, sometimes thousands of dollars a day. The community-minded Granite Mountain Hotshots did it for free when they weren't fighting fires.

Proactive homeowners

The week before those 19 Prescott-based hotshots died, they were helping contain the Doce Fire. It crested their namesake Granite Mountain, northwest of the city, but faded on the edge of horse properties on the other side. Emergency-management officials credited educated and motivated homeowners who kept a clean buffer.

Steve Maslansky is one of them.

His home is just across a ravine from the base of Granite Mountain. The Doce Fire burned to within 35 yards of it.

Upon moving in 17 years ago, Maslansky set out to clear oak brush and other potential kindling. Some parts of his yard are pebble-covered, some are studded with junipers and succulents. Drought-resistant grassy fields where his late wife trained Australian shepherds form an outer shield.

At first, it took him 40 hours of hacking through brush just to find his fence line.

Now, at 65, he hires out most of the work each year, at about \$1,000 to protect his 6 acres.

Just beyond his fence is the dense brush that covered his yard before — and that still persisted on Granite Mountain until the fire raced over it in roughly five hours. The junipers on that side of the fence are charred.

"I think it's safer now, with the fire," he said. "And I've still got some green."

All is green at Breezy Pine. So green, that little of the sky is visible away from the road's clearing. Pressley likes it that way: a shady spot to relax or putter with a metal detector, looking for the gold nuggets that first drew people here.

But after Gladiator, when a U.S. Forest Service official came through and told him not a single home was defensible, he knew something had to change. The dense growth meant firefighters wouldn't risk themselves protecting homes that likely couldn't be saved.

"I'd like this place to have a fighting chance," he said.

Roysdon and others are helping Breezy Pine owners create a plan for a 150-foot-wide pocket of safety in which they'll keep down brush and small trees that could ignite the ponderosas.

It won't be a "moonscape," Roysdon promised. Then he drove over a pass and descended into Walker, a hillside hamlet of about 500 homes.

He groaned at the sight of unnaturally thick ponderosas.