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Wilderness Workshop: Wildfire risk, cost make Berlaimont unreasonable

Opinion [FOLLOW OPINION](#) | August 13, 2019**Peter Hart**
Valley Voices

To approve the developer's desired access road to Berlaimont Estates, the Forest Service must determine whether the proposed use is reasonable. It is not, for so many reasons.

The most ludicrous aspects may relate to wildfire. Berlaimont Estates will put people and expensive infrastructure in a fire-prone landscape that is far from first responders. As is, there's no property or infrastructure to protect in the area. Land managers can let it burn when the fire comes. But with the addition of 19 new estates, there'll be a need to put firefighters and first responders on that hill when a fire comes. The proposal creates unreasonable risks to health and safety, as well as unreasonable economic costs.

Wildfires are becoming more intense and unpredictable as a result of climate change. Fire seasons are now 78 days longer than in 1970. Twice as many acres burn every year compared to three decades ago, and [scientists believe that acreage may double again by mid-century](#).

Fires put a huge strain on local and federal governments, and result in serious long-term economic impacts. In 2017, the [U.S. Forest Service spent over \\$3.175 billion on wildland fire suppression](#). [By 2021 fire suppression costs will consume more than 2/3rds of the agency's budget](#). That requires land managers to poach funds from other programs, like recreation and wildlife management, and leaves public lands undermanaged in a period of unprecedented demand.

Impacts on local communities are similarly devastating. Locals suffer long-term damages and costs from a [wildfire that can be nine times the cost of fire suppression](#), including lost business and tax revenue, property and infrastructure damage, physical and mental health effects, and landscape rehabilitation. [Nearly half of those costs are borne at the community level by local governments, businesses, and citizens](#). The most difficult, dangerous, and expensive place to fight fire is in the [Wildland Urban Interface \(WUI\), where as much as 95% of suppression costs accrue](#) —places like Berlaimont. The [WUI is being developed faster than any other land-use type in the U.S.](#)

To deal with wildfire risk, proponents of Berlaimont have a mitigation plan proposing that houses be built to standards that allow residents to shelter in place when a wildfire comes. That is necessary because fire is likely to burn up the hill from below, cutting off the one access road and first responders.

There isn't any water to fight a fire on the parcel, so developers proposed constructing a pond big enough for helicopter bucket drops. Houses would have water tanks and sprinklers. Questions remain about where the water would come from. Taxpayers would probably have to pay costs of helicopter use during a wildfire.

The plan boils down to this: hope the new estates are resilient enough that fire could burn over them, hope residents can safely shelter in place, and try to get some water on the hill so firefighters have a chance when a fire comes. The costs of constructing fire-resilient structures would be borne by folks who want to live at Berlaimont Estates — those willing to roll the dice when a fire comes.

But those costs are just the beginning. Most costs associated with wildfire accrue later: when first responders put their lives at risk to protect people and property, and when public land managers engage in a wildland fire that wouldn't be necessary but for a road paved to new estates in the middle of the forest.

Peter Hart is the staff attorney for Wilderness Workshop, the conservation watchdog of nearly 4 million acres of public lands in western Colorado.

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