



BLAZING TERROR

in the Woodlands

Lee Ann Southard and her 2-year-old daughter barely escaped the flames of a March 2002 wildfire north of Ruidoso.

“There was a terrible spring wind blowing that morning,” Southard says. “But it was eerie as I raced out of the house, because the wind sort of stopped and there was a moment of silence. It was the fire just taking air before leaping forward, so I put my baby in the car and took off. I stopped at the bottom of the driveway and looked back, and I saw the flames coming across my backyard towards the house.”

The fire razed Southard’s \$265,000 home and consumed about \$140,000 in valuables. She

The front line: Lee Ann Southard and her 2-year-old daughter stand on the cinders of their old home, which burned in a March 2002 fire north of Ruidoso. Behind them a construction crew lays the foundation for a new home.

and her husband are rebuilding, but nothing can replace the memories and personal items accumulated during a lifetime.

“It’s like a death in the family,” Southard says. “I constantly think about it, all the memories of our home and the things in it. You can’t just go out and repurchase those things.”

Like the Southards, hundreds of families in woodland communities across New Mexico have faced the terror of wildfire in recent years. In the Cerro Grande fire that stormed through northern Los Alamos in 2000, almost 400 families lost their homes.

During the 2000 fire season, the worst on record in New Mexico, more than 2,600 fires consumed 546,000 acres of state and national forest land, causing \$60 million in property damage and fire suppression efforts, according to New Mexico State Forestry Division statistics. Twenty communities were



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AP / WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

Fightin' fire: Albuquerque's firefighters tackle flames in the canopy of the bosque on the west side of the Rio Grande in April.

evacuated to fight the fires, affecting thousands of people.

In an average season, about 800 fires burn through some 120,000 acres of New Mexico forests. The 2002 season, however, has been particularly bad, with the blazes scorching nearly 300,000 acres by mid-July.

It's also been a record fire season for the West, in general, with nearly 3 million acres burned and tens of thousands forced out of their homes.

Dense forests and recurring drought have created chronic fire hazards in Southwestern forests that now perennially threaten the safety of woodland communities. For "wildland-urban interface" communities to survive, foresters say residents must learn to adopt fire-defensible land management practices.

That means thinning trees on private property by 50 percent or more, cleaning up combustible debris from the ground and using fire-resistant

vegetation like succulent plants and well-mowed lawns to act as buffers between forests and homes. It also means constructing houses with non-combustible materials like stucco siding and metal roofing.

The upside of the fire terror is that communities finally are adopting these practices. Foresters say that, in recent fires, defensible landscaping clearly saved many homes.

In the March 2002 blaze that burned the Southard home and 28 others, forester Bill Duemling with the Forestry Division's Capitan District says the fire leaped around many houses with defensible space and noncombustible construction materials, while dwellings right next door burned to the ground.

"It was a fickle fire that burned erratically as 60-mile-per-hour winds caused it to jump from place to place," Duemling says. "Many of

the 200 houses in the area were saved by sheer luck, but there were two houses at the bottom of a canyon, smack in the fire's path, that were unscathed because of thinning and cleaning done on and around those properties."

As evidence of the benefits grows, more woodland residents are likely to get on board.

"This should be a wake up call for everybody," says Ted Winder, who finished thinning his property just one week before the fire north of Ruidoso erupted. "This is nature's way of thinning if we let the trees and vegetation grow too dense. Either we thin it, or Mother Nature will do it for us." **R**