

From the President's desk

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Wildfire magazine

Déjà Vu All Over Again

August 2004 brought several major natural disasters to the United States: first, Hurricane "Charlie" made landfall in Florida, killing 22 folks and causing Billions of dollars in damage. Then, the "Bear" fire started in Northern California, burning down more than 80 residences. Fortunately, no one was killed on "Bear".

As you read this issue of *Wildfire*, it will likely be early October, and the US baseball season will be drawing to a close with the "World Series" (even though only the US and Canada have eligible teams). It seems appropriate, at this time, to place the events of August in the context of baseball, and more specifically, in the view of the world held by one of baseball's greatest players, Yogi Berra of the New York Yankees. Yogi was credited with coining the phrase "Déjà vu all over again", and it seems especially appropriate to describe what happened both in Florida and in California.

"Charlie" made landfall in an area known not-so-affectionately as "Hurricane Alley". Gee, do you think that it got that name for a reason? And we're shocked and dismayed when another hurricane comes ashore in that very area?? The "Bear" fire occurred in an area in northern California where another major fire - the "Jones Fire in 1999 - destroyed about 174 homes. And now again, folks are upset because homes were lost from a wildfire in a known fire environment.

A few years ago, a newspaper writer in the Denver, Colorado area coined the phrase "the Stupid Zone" to describe areas where people build homes in spite of the obvious natural hazards of the area. "Hurricane Alley" and the Wildland-Urban Interface seem to meet his criteria pretty well. But, this is America, and everybody should be free to do whatever they want, right? It's guaranteed in the Bill of Rights!

I strongly support the concept of individual Freedom, with a few exceptions: first, when it costs me, and other taxpayers, unreasonable amounts of our tax dollars to indulge the foolishness of those who chose to build and live in those areas like Hurricane Alley and the Interface; and secondly, and in my judgement more importantly, when those folks in the Interface expect me and my fellow firefighters to place ourselves in unnecessary risk to protect the property that they did not take the basic precautions to protect from wildfire.

The fire in 1999 that destroyed 174 homes occurred 5 years ago. What have the homeowners in the area done since then to make their homes FireSafe? Obviously not enough, since another 80 burned down in 2004. Did the local County Commissioners change the building codes to require non-flammable construction? Did the local fire District require "defensible space" around the existing homes, and conduct a yearly firesafe inspection of these homes? Most importantly: did the individual homeowners redeem THEIR responsibilities to do the basic things that are widely known to make a difference when wildfires do inevitably occur?

I'm afraid that these are not the last homes that will burn down from wildfires in 2004, not only in the US, Canada, Portugal, Spain, France and China. And don't forget that the Aussies are having some drought conditions, and will be into their Summer fire season before 2004 ends, too!

My only hope is that all of the folks involved in wildfire/bushfire suppression have the training, experience and WISDOM to back off and let structures burn to the ground when it may put firefighters at unacceptable risk. We didn't chose to live in the "Stupid Zone", and don't need to bring Yogi's words back to life: Déjà vu all over again!