

[More Metro news](#)

Insurers adding fire-retardant gel as policy option

By Emmet Pierce
UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

March 25, 2008

Bill and Marisa Rastetter of Rancho Santa Fe are convinced that their 5,400-square-foot home would have been destroyed during the October wildfires if not for a homeowner's insurance policy that offers an extra level of protection in wealthier neighborhoods.

When a wall of flames approached the house and there were no regular firefighters on the scene, the couple called AIG, one of a growing number of insurance companies that include the spraying of fire-retardant chemicals as part of their coverage.

"They sprayed the front of the house and hit a lot of the hot spots that were flaming at that time," said Marisa Rastetter, whose husband was the CEO of San Diego's Idex Pharmaceuticals until it merged with the Massachusetts company Biogen in 2003.

Although such policies don't come cheap, it was worth "every penny and then some," she said. "Granted, it is all insured, but there are so many valuables and memorabilia and heirlooms. There is no price to save it."



SEAN M. HAFHEY / Union-Tribune
Marisa Rastetter's policy included fire-protection services that she credits with saving her Rancho Santa Fe home in October.

Now other companies that provide homeowner's insurance are identifying supplemental fire-protection services as a business opportunity. The Chubb Group of Insurance Companies recently announced a program that includes the spraying of fire-blocking gel during wildfires, and Fireman's Fund also plans to enter the market.

The companies typically use Global Positioning Systems to track wildfires, then dispatch teams to spray fire-blocking gels or retardants in advance of the flames.

"We are seeing more of that kind of above-and-beyond service in high-end markets," said Candysse Miller, executive director of the Insurance Information Network of California.

But as a new wildfire season approaches, some public safety officials worry that private firefighting programs could interfere with their efforts to combat flames. Other observers worry that two tiers of fire protection may be emerging: one for the general population and one for the affluent.

"We are totally sensitive to homeowners wanting to ensure protection of their properties based on the last two major fires, the Cedar and the Witch Creek," said Maurice Luque, spokesman for the San Diego Fire-Rescue Department. "Protection, in their minds, was somewhat lacking. But in the course of doing this, we don't want to see more problems created than are solved by private fire-protection services."

Under AIG's program, which began here in 2005, Oregon-based Firebreak Spray Systems sprays liquid fire retardant around endangered homes in some of the region's most expensive neighborhoods. Chubb said its new program is aimed at properties insured for \$1 million or more.

Still another player on the scene is Pacific Fire Guard of Westlake Village, which plans to enter the market in time for this year's fire season. The company is in negotiations with Fireman's Fund, which soon will offer fire-prevention spraying service as part of its homeowner's policies.

"We will offer it to all policyholders," said Fireman's Fund spokeswoman Janet Ruiz. "Our target market is \$1 million or more" in insured property per household.

Insurance companies need not be in conflict with public agencies, said Sam DiGiovanna, a veteran firefighter who serves as chief of the Firebreak response program.

"We adhere to proper procedures," he said. "We don't break rules. We are not just out there freelancing. We check in. If whoever is running the fire thinks it's too dangerous to go into a particular area, we don't go into that area."

Kevin O'Leary, a division chief for Cal Fire, sees pros and cons. Some homeowners who tend to remain during dangerous wildfires might be more willing to evacuate if they knew their homes were protected by private crews with fire retardants, he said.

"The key to it is communications with us so we know that the engines are out there (and) where they are," O'Leary said.

Firebreak owner Jim Aamondt said the expansion of housing into wildland areas has overburdened fire departments and created a niche for businesses like his throughout the West.

"The number of homes in the wildland-urban interface is growing," he said. "They are high-value homes in high-risk areas."

Companies that spray fire retardants and gels emphasize that their products are safe for the environment.

Nicolas Retsinas, director of Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing Studies, said buying an insurance policy that offers supplemental fire protection is no different than hiring private security guards or sending your children to private schools.

But Samuel Kang, legal counsel to the Greenlining Institute, which advocates for low-income and minority communities, said insurance companies should offer the same services in all communities.

"It seems like insurance is increasingly becoming a tool for people who are at upper-income levels, which is unfortunate," Kang said.

Gabe del Rio, president of the Housing Opportunities Collaborative, a consortium of housing counseling agencies, said the new fire-prevention service makes sense for insurance companies, which have a lot to lose when expensive homes are destroyed.

The Chubb Group is making its service available in 13 states. An annual Chubb premium on a homeowner's policy for \$1 million in coverage in the San Diego region could be \$3,500, depending on location and other factors, said spokesman Mark Schussel. The program, which will be administered by Montana-based Wildfire Defense Systems, will use a gel compound that works best when applied hours before a fire approaches.

There are several thousand AIG homeowner's insurance customers in the county who now receive fire-prevention services through Firebreak Spray Systems' Private Client Group, Aamondt said.

Ventura County entrepreneur Bill Kneebusch said his company, Pacific Fire Guard, is preparing to spray a fire-blocking gel from specially designed trucks throughout Southern California.

"We are currently in the process of negotiating a deal with Fireman's Fund Insurance Company," he said. "We are starting the fire season with just four pieces of equipment . . . I am funded, and I am rolling forward whether I have an insurance company or not."

Kneebusch said he will begin signing up customers in San Diego County on May 1. If offered independently from a homeowner's insurance policy, he said, his service will cost about \$1,800 per year for a standard-size home.

■ Emmet Pierce: (619) 293-1372; emmet.pierce@uniontrib.com

Links referenced within this article

More Metro news

<http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/metro/index.html>

emmet.pierce@uniontrib.com

<http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/metro/wildfires/MAILTO:emmet.pierce@uniontrib.com>

Find this article at:

<http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/metro/wildfires/20080325-9999-1n25spray.html>

Uncheck the box to remove the list of links referenced in the article.