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Californians risk lives to live with nature

By Gail Fitzer-Schiller

LOS ANGELES (Reuters) - They live on earthquake fault lines, on cliff tops, in the middle of dying forests and far from any source of water and then they wonder why they're struck by earthquakes, fires, mudslides, floods and drought.

You might call it the California way of life.

"I think seismic activity is both the experience and the symbol of California culture which is a very dramatic, artificial imposition of human will on the land, on nature," said state librarian and University of Southern California history professor Kevin Starr.

"We are continuously allowing suburban development to edge into volatile wilderness."

From the cliff tops of Malibu with breathtaking views of the Pacific Ocean to the foothills of the picturesque San Bernardino Mountains, Californians love to live in the midst of the state's scenic nature and wilderness.

And the trend is evident among both the state's wealthiest residents who live in Malibu mansions and the middle class who find cheaper housing in the countryside and rural foothills of the San Bernardino Mountains.

But now with some of the worst wildfires in California history ravaging the southern part of the state, some experts are blaming Californians and their government officials for exacerbating the extent of casualties, damage and even the intensity of some of the natural disasters that strike the state.

By choosing to live on fault lines, on clifftops and in the wilderness Amid dying forests, Californians are taking on too much risk that can jeopardise not only their own lives, but those of others who choose to

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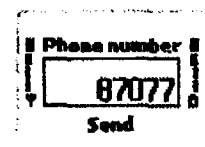
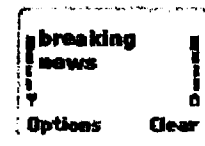
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live on safer terrain, historians and ecologists say.

And county governments that not only allow development of these precarious areas, but subsidise the risk homeowners take by bailing them out whenever disaster strikes are also at fault, they say.

"It takes both nature and society to produce disasters like this," University of California at Irvine history Professor Mike Davis said of the ferocious wildfires that have killed 20 people, destroyed over 2,000 homes and scorched some 644,000 acres (254,000 hectares) of land.

"If Southern California seems like an apocalyptic theme park it's because we've made it one due to the absence of regional planning, bad land use policies and the political domination of local government by developers," Davis said.

Ecologists say the wildfires raging throughout southern California would never have been this deadly or destructive if previous smaller fires had been able to run their course, burning swatches of forest that would serve as a natural fire break.

SUBURBAN DEVELOPMENT

Because there is so much suburban development Amid the wilderness, California firefighters usually extinguish fires quickly and refrain from a policy of purposely burning brush that acts as fuel for wildfires.

"I think the government's natural reaction is to protect property wherever it is. Unfortunately, in determining those policies, the government does not take into adequate account the increased risk they put people in urban areas by suppressing fires in the back country," said Professor Richard Carson, chairman of the economics department at the University of California, San Diego.

Whatever risks they take in choosing where they live, Californians rely on the government to bail them out and help pay the cost of rebuilding their homes.

In fact, most of the residents whose homes have been scorched by wildfires in the past week have vowed to rebuild and return to their communities. Even some who lost their homes for a second time to California infernos have pledged to rebuild.

"These incursions into these volatile areas involve the assumption of enormous public subsidies. The people of California have determined they want to live in a condition of subsidised risk," said Starr.

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